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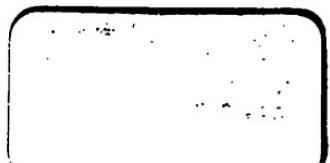
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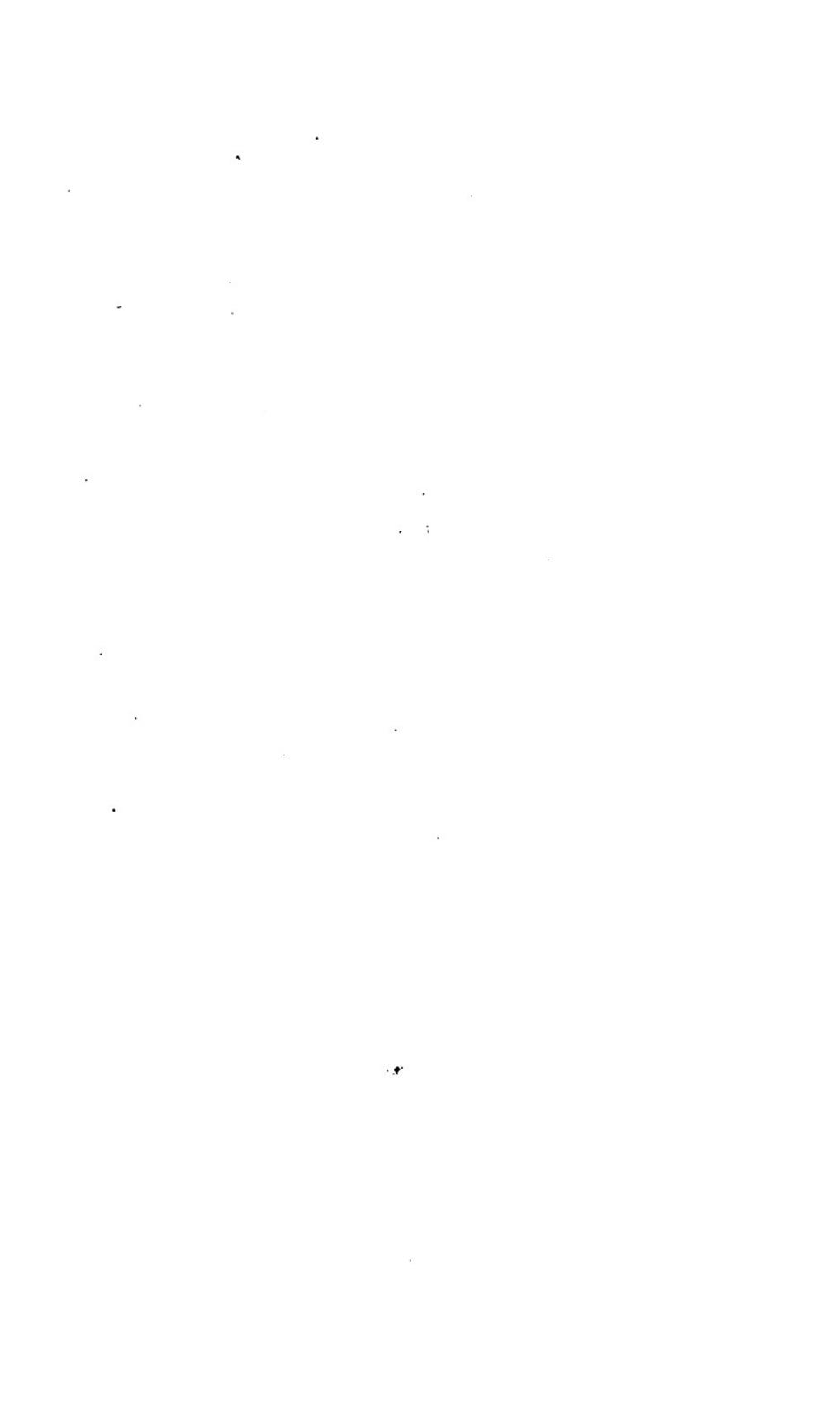




A DOUBLE SECRET

AND

GOLDEN PIPPIN.



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AND

GOLDEN PIPPIN.

BY

JOHN POMEROY,

AUTHOR OF "OPPOSITE NEIGHBOURS," "UNTIL THE END,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.



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A DOUBLE SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE SNOW.

A TRAVELLING carriage drew up at the lych gate of Rencliffe churchyard. The horses steam, the servant lets down the steps, and a young man, dressed in mourning, and bearing the air of superior position in life, descends, saying quietly,—

“Wait three minutes, Biddulph.”

He raised the latch of the small gate, and passed on to see his mother’s grave before departure. Lifting its head above the snow, like a little green island in a frozen sea, for the other eminences were covered with snow, it was conspicuous. The winter had been terribly

severe ; but a day of thaw had caused the blanket of snow to slip from this green grave, which was raised higher, and turfed more recently than the others.

Such a long frost had reigned, the intense cold had nipped both old and young. The church looked grey and desolate, the trees dark against the sky, and clouds hurried along, portending another fall. Everything looked miserable.

Three minutes elapsed—the young man returned. Men do not betray to dependants what they feel. He said only,—

“Now then, drive on ; we have twenty minutes to reach the station.” The coachman obeyed. At the station a servant handed a railway ticket to Lord Rencliffe, who, taking it, said,—

“See that the artist begins at once.”

“I will, my lord.”

“See to it, some of you. I hope to return in five or six years, and to find the monument with something like time stains ; so see that it is put up at once.”

“My lord, your drawings will be reminders——”

"Oh, as to that, run up to town, some of you, now and then, and let me know when it is finished."

The train came up and conversation ceased. Duval was to exercise his patience for some months ; he left the terminus with the calm which had become habitual to the Frenchman after long residence in England. He was left in charge of many matters, though doubtless would have preferred to accompany his master to Italy.

On the same cold cloudy day the green grave had yet another visitor. This time a fair young girl, did we write her description by her hair or figure. Her face was lovely, but so mournful in expression that her features lost the share of beauty due to them. She looked as if she had reckoned the winters of her life and no summers.

"She is there," she said. "I am jealous of her influence no longer, but I am no better off. I forgive her, but all the injury she could do has been done. Harrold is gone ; I never can love another, nor shall I try. Life will be a

round of stern duties. I suppose I shall accomplish them?"

She mused for some minutes, then paced up and down the churchyard path. Out of the ivy on the church tower came two ravens. Sheridan had no superstitions; but she shivered, and ejaculated, "Horrid things!"

Then it began to rain—rain so coldly and harshly that each globule as it touched her felt like ice. It was all very miserable. She shook her head, and then standing on the grave, said,—

"Oh, Harrold, Harrold, what a pitiful mistake it is! Life is a dreary day. You are gone. I shall never love the other. On this island of green I renounce hope and comfort, and look for the time when my heart will be as cold as the snow around me. Without Harrold, sunshine can never come; he is gone, and my lot is settled for me. Yes, you poor thing here at my feet know not the misery you have caused. They may call me young, but I feel as old as you were. Farewell," she said, moving away; "I forgive you, but it is an effort, and I cannot forgive Rencliffe;

neither do I wish myself beside you, for life's strange drama must be played out. My heart is not of the sort to break ; it is tough and sore, and will beat for Harrold, at any rate until I am forced to marry Sir Thomas, so——”

Here her soliloquy ended ; she gathered up her long, wide skirts, the folds of which were escaping their bounds or straps, and strode from the churchyard.

Harrold, her first love, was gone ; there should be no further show of feeling, she had shed no tears, she would shed none, but the suffering left traces, as all suffering does ; her face had a sameness of expression, a lack of youthful interest in life. With Sheridan, her mute intensity produced in the eyes of most, and of those who watched her carefully, an improved cast of countenance.

At her age physical strength prevails, especially where country life is the usual one, and daily walks habitual. She exerted some power too, and mastered her grief. She had a manly name, and told herself that a manly spirit would be consistent. It is true her

temper changed, she acquired an amount of obstinacy which puzzled her father ; in her feminine eyes it was only the due resentment of wrong, but it stood by her in after years, and denoted a change from a gentle, pliable girl, to the firm will of a very determined woman.

She made a vow that she would neither look for comfort nor accept love. In other years winter had been welcome. She skated well, she enjoyed the bracing air, and her own endurance of cold had been a pleasant sensation ; but this year "the winter of discontent" had set in, and she found pleasure in nothing.

Avoiding the village, Miss Herbert ascended a steep hill, walking fast through the softening snow without heeding it, her senses shrouded with the determination that the future must be dark, that her life must be without excitement or joy. Yet she had, as before said, no sentimental longing to die, to leave the world. No, in her heart of hearts she, without confessing it, enjoyed the idea of doing battle with it ; but she wanted the good motive

which would have formed a fine character. A conviction was in her mind that she did not mean to struggle against—that the power of love had died out; it was not a momentary impulse that led her to seek Lady Rencliffe's grave, only a sensation that frost and the sight of that mound would be congenial.

As she neared home her face bore a solemn and strange expression for one of eighteen or nineteen years, which should tell of faith and hope.

A ruddy glow greeted her at the windows of the entrance-hall, great logs of wood were blazing in the wide fire-places as she trod quickly. No one came forth to meet her, no dog started at her footsteps, or gave a short joyful bark at her coming; no voice broke the stillness; it was too early for shutters or curtains to break the glare within. Sheridan opened the door and entered as she usually did — she was always independent — and stamping the snow, which still adhered, away from her boots and petticoat, began to ascend the stairs.

“Ah, signora!” said a voice, greeting her on the landing-place.

“Ebbene, Teresa!” And the young lady closed a red baize-covered door upon her assailant, and the Italian opening it followed her.

“Signorina!”

CHAPTER II.

HARROLD.

“SIGNORINA ! signorina ! ”

“Oh, Teresa ! do not torment me.”

“C’è state il Giovane ? ”

“Quando ? ”

“Quest’ora.”

“Ed’ora ? ”

“A lasciato un fiore, bello.”

“Dove ? oh ditemi tutto, Teresa.”

The old Italian woman opened a door, in a moment reappearing with a white camellia of surpassing excellence and beauty.

“A lasciato questo.”

“Lasciatemi, Teresa.”

“E bello,” said Teresa, warmly.

“E bello si,” said the English girl, coldly.

It was even so. She had been for hours

tramping down the snow, breaking her heart about Harrold, and he, hopeless as herself, had yet in his great love for her come back from somewhere, for his movements were never known to her ; he might have come from Liverpool or Southampton ; she believed he had sailed long before. However, he had been ; forbidden to write, he had yet in some mysterious way reached Teresa, and finding Sheridan from home, had entrusted the camellia to her. It was in a tin package, as if it had travelled with him, and he himself inserted the stem into an orange, and bade Teresa place it in a vase where no draught of air could injure it. He had waited for one hour, and then, trusting his farewell to Teresa, had returned whence he came.

Teresa left the room. Sheridan held the fruit and flower, as an orb, still in her hand, and gazed at it. Great dark circles came round her eyes as they were fixed with a strange and earnest look upon the blossom. A long time elapsed, it grew dark outside, and she sat still.

“Poor Harrold, it is all he could do,” she

said. "I hope he will find some one fully worthy of him. It is a solemn thing to make a vow at sixteen. His mother made me swear that I would never marry Harrold. I wish I could have seen him. To have said good-bye for ever, would have eased this bitterness. I pray that no false heart may ever injure his peace of mind. Poor Harrold ! I will wear his white flower this evening too," and her eyes gleamed. She placed the flower tenderly in its vase, for the Italian woman's steps were at her door, took up a book, and sat quietly till it was time to dress for dinner; and at the proper moment appeared in the drawing-room, composed and grave, in a white silk gown with coloured ribbons, and a great white blossom for her jewel.

Her father looked at her angrily. He hoped to see her earlier in the day to greet Sir Thomas Oakbury, who advanced smilingly as she entered the room.

Her mother was astonished at her boldness. She had given orders for her daughter to appear in a certain blue gown, with pearls, for Sheridan had become too *insouciant* as to her

toilette of late to be permitted to act for herself. But, Teresa, full of the recollection of Harrold's visit, and, like all Italians, romantically inclined to favour a lover, had mentioned madame's suggestion, but not enforced it, and the young lady did not even hear her remarks, but dressed absently enough in the white, and chose the camellia for her only ornament.

Sir Thomas was accustomed to the ways of the family. With one of deeper feelings it would not have been yet too late to draw back, but he knew many circumstances which accounted for the repellant manners, and so submitted. He saw that both father and mother were in some degree discomfited, and conversation was only maintained with effort. Dinner broke the ice very soon. Sheridan did what she could to give an easier tone; but Sir Thomas could not be flattered at her calm, cool manner. A younger man would have preferred a little flutter as evidence of some feeling when she replied to his questions.

"My ponies? Oh, they are not frosted. I do not care about driving now. Mamma only goes out in the close carriage. I always walk."

"Aladdin is miserable in the frost."

"Yes, poor fellow, I believe it; you must feel almost the same."

"Not quite. I can come here."

"You are very good, Sir Thomas, to bear our moody ways."

"When we get to Florence you will find it was this place which disgusted you."

"Perhaps so," said the young lady, musingly.

"Is that camellia from the conservatory here?" her father asked in a loud voice.

"No, papa."

"We have none so fine," said Mrs. Herbert; "how did you get it?"

"It is purchased, mamma, and dearly."

A strong mental constitution obtains great control. Sheridan did not blush nor waver. There was something which awed her mother into silence, and Sir Thomas felt more tenderly towards his affianced bride, for he saw she suffered. His determination became fixed to stand between her and annoyance, though he could not fully understand why she, with apparently all that could make life worth having around her, should be unhappy.

"Lord Rencliffe is gone," said Mrs. Herbert. "I fear the Hall is to be let, which will trouble me. I like to have the park free."

"I don't suppose the tenant will care whether you drive through or not," said her husband.

"I hear the church is to be embellished with a window, and that a fine monument is being executed for the churchyard," said Sir Thomas.

"I wonder much that Rencliffe did not choose to send one from Rome rather; it will be a poor remembrance, I suspect," said Mr. Herbert.

"There I cannot agree. Why cannot artists work in this country?"

"Is it not true," Sheridan asked, "that Lord Rencliffe made the sketches himself, and has left even a model wrought by himself with Pierre Delorme, that *protégé* of Mr. Meadows?"

"I believe so; he is obtaining a notoriety. You will see some of his work, for he has furnished my old house with fine new chimney-pieces, equal, Mr. Meadows says, to any work in Italy?"

"I should like to be——." Sheridan stopped; she had spoken in her own old voice, and a little honest enthusiasm showed itself.

"You would like to be a patroness of some poor Pierre, like Mr. Meadows is of many? You would like to do as much good as he does?" Sir Thomas said, kindly.

"I think I meant that." And she went away with her mother somewhat lighter in heart.

Sheridan was not fond of music; but in the evening Sir Thomas Oakbury asked her to play, and she complied, for she played well, in a sort of mechanical, correct manner looking upon herself as a mere machine, and as she followed the measure of the shadow air in *Dinorah*, or the soldiers' chorus in *Faust*, her thoughts shaped themselves into words concerning Harrold.

She did not try to crush down her love for him. She sorrowed over all remembrances; but having made vows to a dying woman, and being bound to carry the burthen of a deadly secret through life, she thought to compromise.

Playing the greater portion of the opera of *Faust* occupied the evening. Her father was courteous, and spoke of the condition of the horses, of the state of the hounds, and county matters in general. Mrs. Herbert was busy threading beads, and furnishing a bazaar, her constant employment.

Sir Thomas came to shake hands before departing. Miss Herbert rose and stood by the fireplace. As he took her hand, the white petals of the camellia shed themselves like a little shower of snow.

“Poor Harrold’s flower!” thought Sheridan. She only sighed wearily, and looked on the white flakes lying at her feet on the rug, with a very bitter knowledge returning to her memory.

CHAPTER III.

ALADDIN.

“IT is harder to bear than disease, I think I do really believe a good, real, painful illness, downright agony, would do me good. One cannot tell ; I thought to-night Sir Thomas seemed to understand something about me, better than I do myself, perhaps. Years may go quicker than the last few months. Who knows ?”

Thus thought her young lady, as, attired in pink flannel, she seemed to listen to Teresa’s chatter. Her hair was duly arranged for the night, and submissively she endured her loquacious attendant.

Next morning Teresa waited in the old schoolroom, and Sheridan having gone through her father’s remarks on the morning papers, and seen him retire to his study, and watched

Mrs. Herbert fidget about in rustling silk and long ribbons, and finally settle down at her writing-table, sought her old corner, and sat down to write to Constance Somerton. Teresa had a world of remarks to make, and little incidents to recite, concerning affairs of the household or the village, and as she had never mastered sufficient English to make a confidante in one of her fellow-servants, Miss Herbert had learnt to regard it as her morning duty to let Teresa pour forth, without an attempt to stem the torrent, which spent itself in due time.

“ MY DEAR CONSTANCE,

“ You thought I was going to profit by all your good advice. This is to give notice that I am not. Something has occurred to which I may never refer again, but which has rendered your friend’s mind in worse condition than ever. Do not tell me I shall feel less wretched after a time. I had yesterday a white camellia ; no matter whence it came. I registered over it an oath, and it was for good, having been led thereto by Sir Thomas Oakbury ; and I was

determined to keep my camellia for ever, and let a dried-up mummy plead, if I should be at any time tempted. My camellia fell to pieces, my good resolutions are shattered, and, like the flower, cannot be got together again.

“I am sick of prosperity. I think if the house were on fire, and I had to save just a very little, and make that do, life might be pleasant. I saw a woman yesterday washing potatoes, and I envied her ; perhaps not the actual employment, but in very truth, Constance, I do envy her and anyone who has active life. I feel wicked, and papa makes me more so. Undutiful ? Of course—I grant it. However, you must absolve me. I have been very good to kind Sir Thomas Oakbury, and mean to be so ; he is not exigeant, and I suppose he will never care much about me. So much the better, for I am not worth it. I am quite sure it would be right if I were to break off our engagement ; but do not fear. You will have the pleasure very soon of seeing the knot tied, and I cannot think what mamma will do then ; every day at present she has patterns of lace, or bits of silk in letters, as if Sir Thomas or I cared

whether the edgings were wrought in diamonds or squares. I look to you, Constance, to bear me up. I shall want some one in after-life, I expect, to lean on ; for at this moment I feel very much inclined to turn restive and shirk my duties, which seem to stand in a formidable array. It is well things have gone so far ; but for having you at the wedding, I would now renounce the whole affair. One thing I am resolved upon, and I write to you on that account : I never will be called ‘ Sheridan ’ after my marriage. With Sir Thomas I know I shall be Lady Oakbury, and that is enough for strangers. I am all strife and steel to-day, all miserable, and but for just a few things should become a total wreck.

“ Yours ever,

“ S. HERBERT.”

Sheridan felt better after this outpouring, and prepared to go out.

“ Ma piove, signorina.”

“ Che importa ? ”

Expostulation on the part of Teresa followed, but vainly. A waterproof cloak was the excuse

for insubordination. Mrs. Herbert was crossing the hall.

“ My dear child, it rains.”

“ Yes, mamma.”

“ And you are going out ? ”

“ Yes, mamma.”

“ You are not in your senses, my child.”

“ I must go, mamma.”

“ Does nothing else amuse you ? ”

“ Nothing in the world, mamma.”

The mother went back to her warm drawing-room ; she gave a sigh, not for the companionship of her daughter, but over the strange fancies which induced her to go out in such weather.

The thaw continued, and splash, splash went the feet of the young lady in the melting snow.

“ That girl is mad,” was Mr. Herbert’s observation, as he saw her from his study window ; and all relapsed into the silence which suits a house where a dead body reposes. Mr. Herbert, with books and papers about him, did nothing ; he had few letters to write, none of importance, and after seeking in the columns

of the *Times* and other papers for amusement, felt himself ill-treated that he could not hunt ; he had nothing to do, and the weary feeling sat more heavily on him than on his daughter.

He was a moderate politician, had once represented his county, but had not strength of purpose to hold his seat ; he resented advice, was weak in mind, and carried away by impulse, and weighed by the merest trifles, very enthusiastic about nothings, and spoke freely, but his opinion usually went with the last speaker. Even as a county magistrate he was not popular ; no one depended on his judgment, and had he never attended the court-house at all, in all probability he would not have been missed. His life was monotonous, and when he asserted his authority, it was with a sort of assurance that often induced some one to dispute it ; he had no idea of rendering his days more useful, but let them slip away without honour, if without harm. Mrs. Herbert read flimsy French novels, and worked at many-tinted wools and silks ; her whole life had been a quiet one. If she had visions in early youth

of what a mother's career should be, she failed to carry them out, for from her marriage she was listless, and never seemed to care for the wants of her children. Head nurses of good character and distinguished probity, followed by nursery governesses, separated her from them at first, and she was satisfied when one, who had taught the children of a duchess to glide gracefully into a room, assured her that Mademoiselle Chérie was *charmante*.

Sheridan never remembered clasping her arms round her mother, or sitting with her in familiar converse at any time, as children sit with mothers ; eyes glistening and cheeks flushing with pleasure at the recital of a story, or over a prattle as to the favourite doll, the birds, the rabbits, or the kitten, and its playful ways. Sheridan had no amusements and no pets—these were vulgar. Punctuality was the rule of life—dolls, hoops, and balls were supplied as were her dresses ; when one set grew shabby, they were replaced by new, but the child had no old favourites. Daily she saw her father for a few minutes after dinner, for

the two children were shown with dessert. After that, for half an hour they looked very neat and nice in the drawing-room ; but there was no sympathy with the mother, no glowing love, no active enjoyment.

Seeing how little love existed in childhood between Sheridan and her mother, one is not surprised that there was little control on the one side, or respect on the other.

Sheridan had known happiness, though it was not at home. Some trifling illness caused her to be taken to her grandfather's after whom she was named, with her French governess and Italian maid ; there she found life to be a pleasure. Her pony, with its pretty accoutrements, all her own, made her days delightful. With her grandfather she rode fearlessly, and was so unhappy on being sent back to her home, that she wrote a letter in such woe, that it melted the heart of her grandfather, and he appeared one day at his daughter's house, with a request that he might carry off his young namesake for an unlimited period.

From there at sixteen, she arranged to elope with Harrold Rencliffe, with whose mother she

had held stormy interviews ; but the storm all subsided, the elopement was put an end to, and Sheridan bore with her the secret which had tortured Harrold's mother's life, when she was laid in the old churchyard.

It was there, too, she met Constance Somerton, whose fine strong character served to prop up hers at times, and at the beginning of this present winter the letters of her friend served as guides and landmarks. She translated passages concerning tableaux or balls for Teresa's benefit, and kept for herself the bold advice, the never failing friendship of Constance, whose superior wisdom wished to blot out the past for Sheridan, and sketch in, a future of utility and vigour.

Thinking of her friend, our young lady plodded on till the sound of horses made her turn round, and she saw two grooms, and two noble horses, one of which she had ridden many a time.

“ It is Aladdin ! ” she exclaimed.

The servant touched his cap, the animal arched his neck, and raised his ears at her voice.

"Aladdin," she said again, "how came you here?" The men pulled up.

"We are bringing him quietly down," one said, "from London. He did not like the train, so we left it at Rencliffe Bridge, and are taking him down to Sir Thomas Oakbury's."

Sheridan patted the beast and walked on; it was on her tongue to ask more questions, but she did not. Aladdin and his companions passed out of sight, and again Sheridan felt lighter in heart.

"Can it be," she asked herself, "that Sir Thomas knows my liking for Aladdin, and has bought him on that account?" and her mind ran off to the happy rides with Harrold, two years ago, till she almost wished she had not seen him.

The horse was worthy of her admiration, nevertheless, and moreover had been the means of her meeting with Sir Thomas Oakbury, and if she dreamed after seeing him of happier days, and could look upon stern realities with some hope, which spoke of medicine for some of her woes, Aladdin had done good. Yesterday life

was all bitterness and dislike ; to-day she had a vision of sheltering care, in the fact that the horse was going to her future home, and if Sir Thomas had purchased him to please her she determined to be grateful.

CHAPTER IV.

OAKBURY CHASE.

THE master of Oakbury Chase was busy preparing for the reception of a wife. He was fifty years of age or nearly so, and yet had a romantic sort of attachment towards Sheridan, whom he had known since she was a child at her grandfather's. He had watched Lord Rencliffe's affection for her, and her own intense love for Harrold, the younger brother of his lordship ; but of this she either knew nothing, or seemed to know nothing. Sir Thomas forebore to recall the past : he was accepted, and the day for the marriage arranged, and he was satisfied, and eager to have all intentions carried out in the best manner he could devise.

Lord Rencliffe he knew had proposed formally for Miss Herbert, and been refused.

"How tiresome!" she exclaimed; "I shall not be able to ride Aladdin any more."

"My dear, you may own Aladdin, if you will, and your father will be satisfied, I am sure."

"No, grandpapa, I do not wish to marry Lord Rencliffe."

"And what about the picture?"

"Cannot I keep it? I thought to; it was a present from Harrold, not from Rencliffe."

"If you keep it, you will have to marry its master," said the old gentleman, smiling.

But Sheridan argued the point, and did keep her picture.

It had been feared by her governess that she would grow up wild and daring, for she rode so fearlessly. Harrold, her constant companion, taught her to take a fence, and gloried in her riding; he would appear at the school-room door, saying, "Are you ready?" Books were forgotten, a habit, hat, and whip speedily attained, and with more cautions from mademoiselle than she cared to hear, the happy girl descended the stairs, her grandfather already mounted, let Harrold place her in the saddle,

and in ten minutes, the punctuality, the routine of weeks before, would be forgotten.

The young girl looked beautiful when, glowing with excitement, in which her steed partook in equal measure with herself, she bounded over the yielding turf of the forest adjacent to Oakbury Chase ; and on one occasion some slight accident caused Lord Rencliffe to offer Aladdin for her use, and to the surprise of Mr. Sheridan she gladly accepted the loan, till her own horse should be restored to use, for the pony was superseded on great occasions. That day the hounds met at Oakbury, and few could keep pace with Miss Herbert and Aladdin, and that day the master fell in love ; that is, in a quiet way he acknowledged to himself that he could put up with a wife who rode as well as Miss Herbert, not that he then hoped to gain her, he could have no expectation, seeing her with Lord Rencliffe, and his handsome brother Harrold.

A younger son and a younger son's portion was all that Harrold could offer ; it was scornfully rejected by Mr. Herbert, and Harrold took a hasty leave, but paid some stolen visits, in which Teresa always stood his friend.

A square wooden package had been received, directed to Miss Herbert, which being opened by hammer and chisel, was found to contain a portrait of Aladdin, and this picture was now in her room at home, in her father's house. Sheridan had published the receipt of it, and not for one moment doubted that Harrold had sent it in remembrance of their pleasant rides. The horse had belonged to the elder brother, who had laid his love before her in a well-written letter ; the picture she felt sure was sent by Harrold, whose faltering farewell could never be forgotten, and for whom, as long as life lasted, she knew she must suffer doubt and dread. So both brothers were refused, and on her death-bed their mother sent for her and revealed a life of sad mistakes, broken vows, and wounded hearts, that made Sheridan not only regret that she had been chosen for her confidante, but tremble lest her knowledge should darken all the future.

She pursued her way on the dim wintry forenoon till she felt tired, and knew that it was time for luncheon.

"Thank goodness," she said, "Sir Thomas is

gone ! I could not have patience to talk this evening after having seen Aladdin. He may ask me to ride him ; I never will. I will feed and pet him, but I will never mount him again. I will be Lady Oakbury, and very calm and good, and never forget that I am no longer Sheridan Herbert."

Need we describe Oakbury Chase, its fine old oaks, its ferns, its wild flowers, or its agricultural beauties ? All shall stand over till its mistress, now tired with her long walk, shall describe its beauties to Constance in her letters.

Teresa was all a-glow with news : Biddulph was discharged, the old coachman of the Rencliffes for all the years she knew about them, and Duval already had taken upon him to arrange the house for Sir Joseph Parkyns and his family ; people, Biddulph said, who would never suit this neighbourhood, being "Roba di Genoa," for Mr. Biddulph had travelled with his master, and could make use of some Italian he had picked up, so far as to excite curiosity in Teresa, and gratify it in part only. She further described Sir Joseph Parkyns as "Lord Mayor of Birmingham ;" and Sheridan, had she

lacked discretion, would have set her right, but it was easier to listen the first time, and she had just cause never to interrupt.

The luncheon hour too was over, so coffee in her own room was an excuse for Teresa to linger over her mistress, whom in her heart she pitied ; for, in truth, Harrold Renclyffe, at five-and-twenty, was her beau ideal, and she never called Sir Thomas Oakbury by any name but “Quello vecchio.” She had her own ideas as to the why and wherefore of this marriage, and disapproved most cordially of the proceeding, but nevertheless hoped to reside at Oakbury Chase as attendant to its mistress.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE SPRING.

THE snow did not return. Constance wrote that the honeysuckle on their verandah had burst into flower. The snowdrops began to appear, and hyacinths of all hues recovered the little shock which intense cold gave them even in windows of heated rooms. Sheridan was glad to leave Carsall Hall, and Mr. Herbert had some Parliamentary friend whose shadow he wished to become, and so the family removed very early in the season to their usual hotel in London.

Sir Thomas Oakbury was not in town ; few people had arrived, indeed, except those whose fathers or brothers spent their nights at Westminster.

Sheridan asserted her independence in

London as in the country, and, being engaged to be married so soon, it was not contested ; it might have been more graceful had she professed filial love, but Sheridan had none.

Fourteen months ago, her grandfather died, and with that period all softness vanished from her life. A long visit followed to Constance Somerton at the dear old Rectory, where, if she could have had a home, her character would have become more like that of her friend ; but she was tortured with letters from Harrold, telling of his pecuniary and other distresses, and finally sent for hastily. Her only brother had come home from Gibraltar on sick leave, and for two months she had a companion in him. His mind was not well directed in early youth; he chafed at his father's prohibitions, felt annoyed at his mother's coldness, and went away estranged more from home than when he arrived.

Sheridan could see there was mismanagement, but did not know how to rectify it, and was glad when her mother showed her a letter from Lord Rencliffe one morning, which sent the blood flying in an unusual manner ; she had refused Lord Rencliffe, but madly loved his

brother, who was rejected by Mr. Herbert. It was the work of a weak woman, like Mrs. Herbert, to give the letter into her hands; however, she did so. It ran:—

“MADAM,

“I feel that it may be unbecoming on my part to address you, and that I am compelled to do so grieves me sorely: my mother is, we have reason to fear, dying—day and night she moans and desires a companion. We have in vain proposed friends, but she cannot be comforted without the society of Miss Herbert. My brother’s arrangements for going out to Australia render his residence in London needful; we can telegraph at any time if she wishes to see him again, but she took what she believed will be her last farewell of him on Sunday. If Miss Herbert cannot come to-day, with your permission, the bearer can bring your reply, and as my presence might be painful to Miss Herbert, I will take up residence at the Rencliffe Arms for a day or two.

“Your obedient servant,

“RENCLIFFE.”

"Tell him not to leave the house, mamma.
I am not afraid of him."

"But, my dear child, will you go ?"

"Certainly."

It was thus she went and thus she became the bearer of Lady Rencliffe's sorrows and trials. It may have been a strange device on the part of the lady, but she said, "I can trust you, Sheridan, and I must have a long life to watch over my son's interests. You will marry Sir Thomas Oakbury, and be a good, true wife to him. You will not love with the wild young love which my Harrold once inspired ; but he would not have suited you, Sheridan. Rencliffe you despise with his fallen fortunes ; it is better as it is, better for you to marry neither of my sons. Do not interrupt, dear child ; I know you do not like to be advised. With regard to Harrold, do not see him again. Sir Thomas has not proposed, but he will lead you gently through life, like a rival lover to Harrold. It seems to you he has a sort of paternal affection which you are glad to have as you are not happy at home. I know all particulars, Sheridan, and trusting you, as I

have done, I feel I have done wisely." She died in an hour after.

Mrs. Herbert roused herself in London, and made great efforts to bring people about her whom she felt might be useful or agreeable to the future Lady Oakbury, who accepted all things coldly. She became distinguished for her *insouciant* manner. She was impassive, and never awkwardly so, never professed to be bored, or to be about to make a sacrifice of her youth. She had perfect command over tone and feature, and if she said little, nobody could accuse her of taking the trouble to make herself disagreeable.

The season was at its height, royalty presiding; operas, balls, receptions, and gaieties of all kinds in full force when Sheridan was married at St. George's Church, in Hanover Square; Constance Somerton, her chief bridesmaid, assisted as usual by others.

"I have one request to make," said the bride, as she drove back to the hotel with her husband.

"Name it, my dear."

"That I may never be called Sheridan after to-day."

"What shall we call you then, my dear?"

"Anything you please, Sir Thomas, but 'Sheridan' on every occasion would give pain. You shall choose a name."

"I will call you Elfie," said Sir Thomas; "it was, I grant, the name of your little pony; but it is so associated with my first knowledge of you at your grandfather's, that I like it better than any other."

"Thank you. Elfie. Yes, be it so."

And, during the grand *déjeuner*, whenever it was in any way possible for Sir Thomas to address his wife, he called her attention by the word "Elfie."

It was a brilliant marriage. Mr. and Mrs. Herbert were continually told how fortunate their daughter had been in securing Oakbury Chase; and they remained to hear her praises after the happy pair were gone to Brighton, whence in time they were to cross to Dieppe, and finally to make out the autumn in Switzerland.

A general election followed the sitting of Parliament. Mr. Herbert hoped his ambition would be gratified, but he groaned and fretted

deeply and dejectedly as an unsuccessful candidate.

The quiet and solemnity of Carsall Hall would have produced insanity had he tried another dismal winter there, so he discovered that his wife's health was failing, and removed to Pau.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST TIME.

It has been said that Miss Herbert's last few weeks of liberty were spent in a somewhat independent manner. She was accustomed to go out early in the morning with Teresa, perhaps taking a cab to the Zoological Gardens, which was a favourite resort of hers, or to Kensington, where she would walk till her restless spirit grew calm.

Teresa would take these opportunities to transact business on her own account, and one day Sheridan took her to the London Stereoscopic Company's shop in Regent Street, that the old woman might have a good photograph to send to her son Filipo, who lived in Florence, and had sent her his carte de visite lately. Teresa vanished to have her portrait

taken, and Sheridan idly amused herself with the glass cases and their contents. A stranger was waiting also, in a foreign looking dress, and he spoke Italian to an attendant who replied in that language, but the quick ears of Sheridan detected that the Italian was acquired, not natural. Once, too, she met him closely face to face ; she was following a series of views, and did not observe that he was meeting her. He said "Pardon," and she noticed a fine moustache, and eyes which seemed familiar. Whose were they ? Where had she seen them ? He was a handsome man, middle-aged, well-dressed, and with small, nice hands; he carried his gloves in the right hand. All this was flashed upon her mind, just as she heard the glass doors open, and a tall young man entered the shop.

"Sheridan ! is it possible ? Miss Herbert !"

"I did not know you were in England," she said, as her heart gathered up all the blood from her face.

"Rome is too hot now. I only am in town, however, for a short time."

"Have you been home ?"

"Yes, to settle some matters : the house is let for a term of years, so I am to be a wanderer. Perhaps I may go out to Harrold."

"You have——" she hesitated.

"No plans, do you mean? Alas, Miss Herbert, plans without means are useless. However, I must not detain you. Are you alone, or is Mrs. Herbert with you?"

"She is in London ; we are at the usual hotel. I am now waiting for Teresa, who is pleasing herself upstairs by photography. Do you leave town soon ?"

"Yes, very soon, I fear. I shall not be able to pay my respects to——." Then he stopped, for Mrs. Herbert did not make herself gracious to him. Sheridan said,—

"Good-bye, Lord Rencliffe," and gave her hand. At that instant, Teresa, chattering volubly, appeared, and the stranger gleamed questioning eyes upon her, and then turned his back. Lord Rencliffe lifted his hat, and Sheridan felt sorry she had met him. He had spoken of difficulties, or rather of plans not carried out ; and she, striving to pass over these days without remembering Harrold, was re-

minded of him and of all the past when she had tried to crush it under. For an hour or two the foreign gentleman, too, disturbed her ; she could not call to mind what it was that came to the surface, but his face, and especially his eyes, troubled her, till she at length said, “ It must be some dream, I cannot have seen them before ; ” and she dismissed the fancy with her strong will, which nevertheless had impressed itself upon her brain.

Is Sheridan capricious ? We have seen her renounce love for ever ! and yet marry in a brilliant manner ; refuse Lord Rencliffe, and yet speak to him with a pitying friendship when they met in a shop in London ; make vows over Harrold’s white camellia, and break them as easily as the flower itself fell to pieces, and yet she is a heroine. She has had peculiar circumstances wherein to take her place ; and if the knowledge of one woman’s lot, who endured much with a cruel husband, an improvident father, to his sons, left ineffaceable traces on her mind, this was inevitable. Her mind was like a weedy garden, and too much frozen up to venture to tear the bad plants

from the good ; all must grow together till the right time should come for distinguishing.

"Elfie," with the ripened powers of brain which womanhood developed, made no allusion to anything before her marriage. With her change of name came a new character, the restless spirit became more calm, and her manner more consonant with her fair face and abundant wavy hair ; an instructed eye taught her to dress with perfect taste, but she was inclined to great simplicity ; and as the young wife, her demeanour assumed an unobtrusive quiet way, which strangers thought bordered on timidity, but which came of a *sang-froid*, a deep conviction that nothing henceforth could move her as she had been moved ; that life might glide peacefully, she believed possible, but great excitement must for her be improbable. In this frame she was introduced to friends of Sir Thomas, and made acquaintances also new to him. She had no actual humility of spirit, and yet she was glad of the protecting care of her husband ; he was not demonstrative, but all his better qualities were now fostered ; and if not of an endearing

character, Elfie grew more and more to admire his solid good sense, and gradually to believe he could be an object of veneration to her.

In his quiet tenderness she could not see the devotion of a life. She knew he had never loved before, for he had told her so ; but with her perceptions dulled, as they were at present, she could not believe him capable of what she called love. Poor, blind, self-willed Elfie. Yet she intuitively learned many things which pleased him ; and was surprised to find in her husband a linguist, a fair performer on several instruments, and that he had more than the elements of the arts, and promised her variety of employment when they should reach Oakbury Chase.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECOND TIME.

AT Lausanne they determined to make a long stay ; and as Constance Somerton arrived there to visit a sick friend of hers, Elfie found the time pass agreeably. Their talk about happy things was in itself happiness. Constance was a happy mixture of beauty, charity, and love, her manners gay and graceful, a charming figure, and as wise in mind as she was pure.

Lady Bridlynton was her hostess, who hired a delightful villa, and was too feeble to leave it, so sent for Constance to bear her company, for she was not used to sickness ; it had assailed her almost for the first time ; she had a strong constitution, but her erect form bent to illness now, and she was impatient of its continuance.

The mind with women influences the body, but in the case of Lady Bridlynton, no agitation had hitherto affected her strength. She was a woman of violent passions, and her anger would be terrible to witness : nor did occasional fits appear to act as a safety valve ; her vexation would be followed by long days of evil temper, which she passed alone, in a state so morose as to cause pity on the part of her dependents.

This fine constitution, however, gave way at Lausanne, and Constance Somerton came to nurse her, with a tender spirit, and magical power that caused the sick woman comfort, inasmuch as she was spared all trouble, or the humiliation of feeling her weakness.

Thankfully she gave the reins to Constance, who was capable of managing some affairs which had been a trial to her, and in a shorter time than seemed possible, was able to drive out amidst the beauties of the neighbourhood.

Constance introduced Lady Oakbury, who soon preferred that villa to the public places, or any of the English or foreign residents or visitors ; and Sir Thomas left her to follow her

inclinations, glad to see his Elfie so cheerfully enjoying the bright days.

Lady Bridlynton, pale and weak, had a feverish dread of being alone, and her exhausted condition made her enjoy the society of those two friends who talked to each other, and yet were with her. Every day growing better, she desired nothing but to lie back in her carriage, and listen to the voice of Constance, musical and low, as she spoke to Elfie, and sometimes she would say gratefully, "It is very good of Sir Thomas to spare you."

One evening he had driven with them for an hour, but near his own abode left the carriage, telling his wife he would come for her later. It was usual for him to do so, and the ladies set out to return to the villa. Lady Bridlynton and Elfie occupied one seat; Constance sat opposite, with her back to the horses. Elfie was speaking to her, when she was arrested by a man touching her arm. Before she had time to speak, he had seized the driver, deprived him of his whip, and taken the reins, while the poor coachman, palsied

with fear, making no resistance, began to mutter and tremble over a prayer.

"What is this?" asked Lady Bridlynton. "Leave us; this is unjust. So do not frighten us," she spoke in French.

"Give me all you have," he replied in English, "I am in great distress."

"You are cowardly to attack women thus."

"I am no coward; people never take extra men on the hilly roads; do not argue; the coachman will recover his fright. Give me all the money you have."

"I have none here," said the lady.

"I can follow you. I want enough to return to London."

"Drive home, Henri," she said to the coachman.

"I cannot go to your villa; I want it here."

Elfie quietly offered her watch.

"I do not want watches, jewellery, or plate. It must be available money, English or French," said the man, who still retained the reins, and when Henri stirred, gave him a little cuff as one would do to silence a dog.

Lady Bridlynton spoke calmly,—

"Give the man the reins; it is growing late; follow the carriage ; give me your word that you will depart, and that no harm shall come of it, and I will get you the money and bring it to the villa gate."

"Allez," he said to the driver, "and for you, I will thank you in England."

Constance, nearly fainting with terror, leaned against Elfie for support, who watched every gesture of the tall figure, changing her seat for the purpose, and also to hold Constance more conveniently. He did not walk with the shuffling gait of an habitual beggar, nor did he appear to seek disguise, for he took off his hat and carried it for some minutes. He passed his hand across his brow ; it was small and well-formed, like the hand of a well-born person, but there was no white wristband, nothing to betoken care. His clothes were not those of a gentleman, yet not either, of a mendicant. As the carriage turned to pass into the avenue to the villa, she saw his face distinctly, raised ; his eyes kindled, a gleam in them had met hers before. She could not be mistaken. Those eyes, impassive before, had shown the strange

light which told of power. Elfie was quite collected, and made no gesture or sign, inwardly hoping she knew not what.

Thought is so quick, she had twenty questions and answers self-applied before Lady Bridlynton hurried them into the house, and, closing the doors, went to seek the promised money.

Elfie deposited Constance on a sofa, and awaited the elder lady's return.

"I will go with you," she said ; "take my arm."

"I meant to go alone," said Lady Bridlynton, "but I see you are very brave. I thought so, when you offered your watch, and am not mistaken."

The man was not hidden by the wall, or standing as if ashamed of his errand ; he may have felt safe in the fears of the ladies ; be it as it may have been, Elfie saw bank notes to a considerable amount counted into his hands.

He stood as if simply receiving a debt ; then, taking half the money, he put it into his pocket, and folding the other notes neatly,

he returned them with a low bow to Lady Bridlynton, saying,—

“Madame, I thank you very much for this loan, you have done me a great favour ; within a year you shall have this sum returned in London. Believe me, I am not ungrateful.”

Lady Bridlynton did not open her lips, or seem to regard his promise or his threat to visit her in London. With all his effrontery, no address appeared to be needed on either side, and he walked away, as twilight rapidly advanced, not in the direction of Lausanne, but towards the open country.

Nor did the ladies name the matter. Elfie, sure that she had met that man before, was silent ; she saw her companion carry home the notes, and concluded that he must be a gentleman in some temporary distress ; possibly a gambling transaction forced him to hide and disguise. She only hoped the affair would not be repeated, or molest Lady Bridlynton, so far as to cause a relapse.

Henri had been so terrified that he alarmed the servants by describing a desperate robber who had assaulted him, and taken upon him-

self all control of the horses, &c. When Sir Thomas Oakbury arrived, Henri was loud in his desires that a gendarme or two might help to protect the villa. For several nights they were sedulously guarded, and barricades formed at every entrance. Her ladyship submitted, to appease the servants, but as no symptom appeared of burglar or brigand, peace was shortly restored to the household.

CHAPTER VIII.

A YOUNG ARTIST.

EARLY in the following April workmen were busy in the churchyard at Rencliffe ; and in the course of a few days a monument of most beautiful execution was erected over the grave which has been described.

There was no gloom about the place now. The rooks were very noisy in some tall trees near ; and birds of many kinds were busy in and out of the ivy and amidst the hedge and budding trees which surrounded the enclosure. Voices of children at play, the tap, tap, of the favourite game, shuttlecock and battledore, told that the little world outside could be very happy, even in the vicinity of the dead. The shrill whistle from the near railway could be

heard at intervals, and every sight and sound told of busy life.

The memorial was a carved ledger tomb, the white stone cross lying upon chaste carvings, a wreath of ivy leaves at the head, sprays of a more thorny character intermingled. There was no date, nor verse, nor inscription on the upper portion ; but, let into the granite base, a small panel, with the name “ Elma.”

This was Lady Rencliffe’s Christian name, and this the design given by her son to Pierre Delorme, the *protégé* of Mr. Meadows. Inside the church was a family vault, and over the family pew, which was in the chancel, were some mural tablets, and two or three quaint old figures, in niches ; and down the aisle brasses were let into the pavement : all these were records of the Rencliffes.

It is a curious old church. Frequent restorations, and even some additions, have interfered with the design of the original architect, but the rector still hopes to see the happy day when funds may enable the whole to be repaired : meanwhile he does what he can ; it is kept neatly and reverently. Stringent rules

are adhered to, to prevent the desecration of the graveyard, in which he takes pride. The lych gate remains to tell of the care of an age gone by, for those who came to place a fond friend in the long repose of "God's acre;"—a beautiful thought, that the bearers might shelter beneath it from winter's rain or too bright sunshine.

The turf is kept in perfect order, neatly cut, and no rank weeds or coarse tufts of nettles suffered to disfigure or defile the spot. A few years ago this was the play-place of the village; sheep, too, were turned in by the butcher, to keep alive, suiting his convenience to turn them into mutton; a path used by labourers, too,—a short cut, they fancied,—had to be shut up, and a battle royal it was before the rector gained the victory.

Lady Rencliffe had chosen the spot for her burial; she wished to lie in the open space, and not in the vault, where ancestral bones were mouldering. It was in the upper portion, where the eye could take in a view of extreme richness.

Within a quarter of a mile was the village,

with its varied colouring, a mill, a picturesque bridge, a winding river, long, low, straggling farm buildings, and many cosy, well-to-do houses on either side.

In the foreground the road, and its frequent carts and waggons, with high loads and fine heavy horses.

The rector's house, with its well-planned pleasure-ground, gave varied tints, as yet, of evergreens alone, except for rustic works, and here and there an early rose, and a line of yellow crocus or blue squills which broke the green landscape.

The house had an air of comfort. On entering one felt a cheering atmosphere—solid, handsome furniture, flowers, birds, stained glass ; but it was the rector's voice which gave the charm and the welcome.

It was so, too, at church. One entered with a sensation of hope, not with the cold solemnity which is too prevalent ; and some clergymen instill a portentous awe, which pervades the service, and his sermon depresses the sinner, and makes the better man uncomfortable.

Our rector,—and he shall be nameless, for he is a picture of real life,—had the happy tact of drawing hearers, and praying earnestly with them,—taught them to *use* the Liturgy, and not only to *say* it,—taught sinners to believe, encouraged them to attend to every duty, and to look to Heaven as their home.

His tones were so persuasive, his own life in every relation so true, his love and friendship so worthy of cultivation, that people only deplored his not going more amongst what they called congenial companions : he said he had not time ; the poor were his companions, the schools his recreation, and his garden and his books all the rest he had.

Of this rector Mr. and Mrs. Herbert knew very little. They were not allured, like other people, by his goodness, and never attended church with regularity.

Mr. Herbert always found letters to write on Sunday. Mrs. Herbert allowed any trifle to prevent her going to morning service, and made it a rule not to have her horses out for evening : so got off going to either.

“Elfie” used to go sometimes ; but her mind

was so full of other matters, and so little accustomed to look upon going to church as a duty,—for her French governesses had not produced that effect, and her grandfather was too indulgent to enforce any rule. Often and often she told Constance she envied her religious devotion, and that she actually felt jealous when Teresa, with so much fervour, set off quite early on Sunday mornings to attend the Roman Catholic chapel at Balding.

“She,” she said, “who could go so many miles for her religion must find it a pleasure.”

Constance wrote a kind, long letter to her friend, who replied,—

“I think, as Lady Oakbury, I shall take your advice, and try what regularity may do; it will please Sir Thomas, at any rate. As yet I put on my best bonnet, and am careful to have a handsome Prayer-book, and to conform to all outward matters; but, Constance, I come back with a fatigued sensation, for I hear nothing, and during the service I have always arranged far more than I can bring in, in two or three weeks. I make such tedious varieties of amusements to beguile my long hours and

do away with *ennui*, that it takes all Monday to recover.

" You think I am very wicked ; but papa never goes to church, and if he can bring in a sneering remark about anything ecclesiastical, he does not fail to do so. Our Rector once ventured to send some pamphlets, and it gave offence, and since then mamma has not been to church. Am I too disrespectful ? I must tell you the truth ; and were you to give me up, and to withhold your candour, I should only be worse."

This letter was written more than a year ago, and Lady Oakbury was in a different frame of mind when, one fine, bright May day, she drove to see Lady Rencliffe's memorial. The rector presented himself, and offered refreshment, as he knew no one was at home at her father's house. Elfie accepted his hospitality, liked his society, felt inclined to lament her entire ignorance of all the poor people, and went away with a fixed purpose. She was given to make vows ; but that day, whilst the rector spoke to her, as she ate her biscuit and drank her coffee, though he did not preach or

advise, she felt a movement in her very soul, and a faith that there were better things grew within her, and she sealed the moment with an oath, that if she could not bring herself to love her husband as she knew she ought to do, she would do the utmost in that direction ; and moreover, for his sake, she would give attention and interest to the things he cared for, and after luncheon she went again to that grave with the name of "Elma," and said,—

"I will never come here in bitterness again, but will be tranquil, and confide in the future."

She did not go to Carsall, the Hall had so little attraction as her home ; no "fond memories," as many would suspect ; but bidding farewell to the rector, gave her servants orders to drive to Balding.

She did not often visit that town, but today various wants suggested themselves. She would order materials at once, and set a sewing school to work ; and also speak to her husband about a more suitable mistress than the one, she had been told, at present taught

the girls ; and induce him to build a comfortable house, with a room well adapted for her purpose.

Twelve miles through green fields pass quickly, and Lady Oakbury had scarcely passed the outskirts of the town, than she saw Sir Thomas riding.

"The horses are tired," he said, approaching.

"Yes, I have been to Rencliffe ; but they were put up for an hour at the rectory."

"At Carsall ?"

"No, there was no one at home : I went to see the memorial."

"Child, you pain me," he said, in a low voice ; he was leaning forward, and his hand placed on the carriage near her. Elfie put hers, lightly touching his, for an instant.

"Believe me, I did not go for the reason you attribute."

He looked up, pleased.

It was no place nor time for explanation ; he preferred her to all the world, and he could not bear her now to think of Harrold. She saw this, and that his whole happiness

might be at stake on a few words from her lips.

"I will never go again ; never, at least, without you." There was emotion, passion, in her tones ; her husband felt she had begun to value his happiness, it caused a perturbation at his heart.

"Will you come and visit the artist ?" he asked, after a little pleasant pause.

"Yes ; where does he live ?"

"In St. Jerome Street." He gave orders to the servants, and followed.

Mr. Meadows met them at the door ; he was already known to Lady Oakbury, and she went with him to the studio.

Pierre Delorme had a soul above tombstones ; but what could the young man do ? they paid well, and he had a monopoly, for there was a large cemetery at Hackminster, and his designs were abundant.

Having struggled through years of poverty and oppression in London, where he was neither wanted nor appreciated, his friend Mr. Meadows found him in despair, and proposed that he should try the country ; himself requiring an

object in life, he made inquiries, and after some weeks selected Balding for his experiment. Having purchased for his own house, or those of his friends, several statuettes and a marble copy of a great work, Mr. Meadows enabled Pierre to start with the advantage of ready money, and likewise a paying order or two.

Oakbury Chase was furnished with chimney-pieces, of curious and appropriate forms, supported by figures beautifully carved, or decorated with fruit and flowers in marble. Pierre had given grave consideration to the faces of these supporters, and they were very beautiful, and looked out from under the broad slabs with a sort of intelligence, and spoke well for the artist.

Lord Rencliffe, with affectionate earnestness to have his sketch for his mother's grave well wrought out, had remembered the name of Pierre Delorme, whose contribution to the Exhibition struck him with admiration. He took some trouble to seek out his poor lodgings in London, where the cold had half-deadened him, and he roused himself to take the drawings,

and to promise to execute the order. Lord Rencliffe did not wait to hear that the wretched house in London was not his only shelter now, since he had a home near Mr. Meadows.

Biddulph and Duval were left to inform him where the work would be placed, and all further particulars. Lady Oakbury, having just visited it, gave her opinion on the taste and finish which had been lavished on it, and Mr. Meadows and Pierre entertained her with the contents of the shop till it was time to leave them. "I wish," said Delorme, "milord could come and see his order finished; he told me he should never see it till time, and sun, and wind, and rain had stained it."

"Ah," said Mr. Meadows, "there will be dozens more graves in the churchyard by that time."

"Milord is gone away for years now—so Duval told me, who is gone to join him in Australia."

"Australia?" said Mr. Meadows, knowing little of any of the parties.

"Yes, monsieur ; I am told he has a brother there."

"I wish," thought Elfie, "people would not conspire to talk about Harrold ! No matter how I try to put his memory down, some one will bring him to the surface ; no matter what resolutions I make to lead a peaceful, quiet life, some one will disturb hopes and wishes. Mr. Meadows thinks I went to see that monument as a work of art. I wish it were no more to me. I am sorry I went. Sir Thomas was vexed, but has forgiven ; he is wise, and noble, and good. And now I have put off all about the materials of the sewing-school and a stranger, an artist, has doomed me to the pain of almost hearing Harrold's name, with Sir Thomas standing by ; and Rencliffe is gone to join him !"

Thus the lady pondered over the events of the day, till she reached her own little elegant boudoir.

Her perplexity vanished in the evening. Her husband was respectful and tender ; he listened to her ideas with regard to the girls' school, only telling her with a smile not to be too pre-

sumptuous, for he had little faith in her carrying out troublesome schemes ; but he hoped she would be brought to love useful things, and he was selfish enough to fancy she had some idea of her value in his eyes.

It was new life to him, and heartfelt satisfaction, to see his efforts to make Oakbury Chase an earthly paradise for Elfie were beginning to bear fruit. She did not care for London this year, and he had enjoyed excellent hunting. Years fell off him as he watched her strolling into little dells, or in the sunniest portion of the gardens, diffusing light ; he was very patient ; he could bide his time, but he cherished a fervent hope that he might yet be first in her heart, and blot out with his love the page in her youth which gave a melancholy tinge to her life.

And Elfie came to wish there had never been a Harrold ! and would like to have made a law, in her old impetuous way, that no one should be allowed to display to another the inner life !

Lady Rencliffe's story would come across her when she was nearly happy, and she did fight

against the influence of ghastly dreams which came to her even after a pleasant day, and she would awake and ask herself how she could steep all concerning "Elma" in oblivion, heartily wishing she had never heard the name.

CHAPTER IX.

FRIENDSHIP.

WE have seen Lady Oakbury established at the Chase, and have witnessed in her the birth of a desire to live for better things.

Lady Bridlynton and Constance Somerton had remained at Lausanne till the weather became cold, and then they removed to Rome, and, spending a month in Paris on the way, reached London in the middle of May—where it was some little disappointment to Constance not to find the Oakburys.

Elfie had stiff little letters now and then from her mother, who remained in France, moving according to the season, for Mr. Herbert found amusement, and was better satisfied there, and now and then the China

mail brought her some ill-written sheets from her brother, whose regiment was at Hong-Kong. Harry had thrown off love of home, as a young man should feel it ; and, being the only son, now waited—somewhat impatiently, it is true, and with undutiful regret that his father was not older or more infirm—till he should inherit his property. The letters emanating from such a mind were not likely to interest his sister very deeply ; they were only a record of the chances and changes amongst his brother officers, with general disgust as to his quarters, and calculations concerning his majority, before which he apprehended a fearful time must elapse. Harry was inclined to be affectionate towards Sir Thomas ; in his boyhood he had seen fine hunters and heard his name as distinguished for bold riding and being first in manly sports—and he felt proud of Elfie. Young officers like to have a sister well married, and a hope in time of leave of spending days in active enjoyment, such as Oakbury Chase could afford.

The details of military operations did not interest Elfie, nor political views concerning

China ; but she looked for Harry's letters with earnestness, and placed her brother first upon her list of friends—her only relation, indeed, for whom she felt affection. Mr. and Mrs. Herbert, having seen her married, appeared to lay no claim to her love.

Her next friend to Harry was Constance, whose beauty was sufficient to ensure admiration in all quarters ; but at two-and-twenty she was still unmarried, and not even an engaged lady. Her beauties of mind and heart were yet more attractive, and Sir Thomas was wise enough to rejoice that his wife's most intimate feminine correspondent was Miss Somerton.

None can tell how beautiful was the spot in which the young days of Constance passed away, with a father to whom she was sunshine and joy, and for a short period a young, bright mother watched her, and then a sort of companion and governess—Miss Milner.

At fifty, Major Somerton married a beautiful creature—Emilie de Salis—an orphan left to his charge. It was not wonderful that the ward should love such a guardian. He brought

her to London, where life was life indeed to her—she wanted none other. Not so to Major Somerton, who longed for employment and a settled home after his long wanderings.

An advertisement caught his eye which promised everything he could desire.

“Look at this, Emilie ; it would suit us, I think.”

She took the paper and read.

“I am not tired of London !”

“Not yet ; but you will be ; and in the country you can have flowers, and fruit, and exercise.”

She said nothing. Covent Garden satisfied her with the former, and she did not want the latter.

Major Somerton purchased “The Dales.” He had money really lying idle. The place had all sorts of advantages. He was tired of active life, his young wife was just awaking to the enjoyments of society in London, and she could not yet see that the country promised as great allurements.

Five hours from town, with varieties of hill and valley, wood, and even mountain—for it

was in ——shire,—Major Somerton grew happier daily, and spent time and money liberally in sending down steam apparatus, and every invention to enable him to “farm in earnest,” which a man with some thousands ready to invest may ; and new principles can be carried out, and new instruments tried only on such terms. The poverty-stricken farmers must go on with the old. Experiments are expensive luxuries.

Here the land was good ; a high price given freely, and, as “money was no object,” and a well-informed steward invested with full power, Major Somerton in a few years gloried in the knowledge that his wheat and oats, his turnips and peas, beans, hay, straw, and machinery, were the envy of the neighbourhood.

Such prolific soil, such enviable pastures for his cattle, such fruit, flowers, and varieties of vegetables, were the boast of his steward, gardeners, and dependants.

In all this Major Somerton rejoiced, and with consideration gave his wife three months in London. But the remaining nine bored her so extremely that she gave up life when Con-

stance was quite a child, and passed away as a sort of vision.

A hundred schemes were devised for fattening poultry, and houses and enclosures built to allow various experiments. New devices followed each other for propagating kitchen herbs, or for drying vegetables and roots for winter use.

Manufacturers were made happy by orders for prodigious rolls of matting and tarpauling, to keep off frost ; large sheds were built to cover the produce of acres ; money was poured forth—Major Somerton had it, and he was not one to stand and count the cost.

Without doubt he had fine crops, and carried off prizes from cattle and agricultural shows, and did good, too, by distributing finer kinds of sheep, pigs, and poultry, besides being a purchaser of newly-invented farm implements, &c., &c.

In such consisted his happiness, added to which, in years which followed, the education of Constance became his pleasure and first duty.

Her eyes had the sweetest expression of love for him. She listened solemnly to all he

taught her, and the deep expressive interest never left her face when he was near.

Miss Milner took care that she should not be overworked, or Constance, naturally clever, would have been too industrious a pupil for such a master.

She would amuse herself with problems, and learn lessons in playtime, so earnest was she to carry out her father's wishes. But Miss Milner made her feel interest in out-of-door pleasures, and taught her usefulness in visiting the poor.

But she liked reading better, and understood wise books, which strengthened her mind, and gave tone to her application ; she obtained power and mastery over her thoughts, and at eighteen was as well read and interesting a young woman as could be seen in England—with a singularly beautiful countenance, chestnut hair in rich abundance, hazel eyes of the sweetest expression, and a pink and white complexion which told of perfect health of body and mind.

Her eyes were wondrous, such a depth and lustre ; sincerity and purity they gave forth, and it was with great satisfaction that Major Somerton entrusted her to Lady Bridlynton,

who was to present her, and with whom Constance had a season of success.

She returned to "The Dales" as simple in her tastes, as gay a companion to her father as before ; better satisfied, she said, than ever with home, she went back to her daily readings, her garden and usual pursuits, with even greater gusto, and her busy needle threaded with gold or silk, or thread, wrought curiously, for she plied it with a mind at ease.

Constance sang sweetly, not with *éclat* ; her father did not wish his child to acquire reputation as a vocalist, which he well knew only produces jealousies and bitter disappointments ; he taught her to love her accomplishments for the ornament of her home, and for the recreation of the circle rendered sacred by ties of blood or friendship.

There is nothing so pure and lovely as the regard between a good father and a beloved daughter—she is the light of his home.

The following spring Major Somerton was sometimes weary with his calculations as to land under plough, and various avocations which at sixty-nine are not as easily accom-

plished as in earlier years, but his health was good, and no one ever thought of his age ; his cheerful manner and sprightly gait seemed to defy Time.

Daily readings with Constance, whose classical lore was accumulating, amused him for some hours ; she had received all her education from him and from Miss Milner, and her society was his earthly delight.

I do not believe the idea of her leaving him ever entered into his mind ; the future never troubled him, nor did he ever seem to look beyond the day and its "daily bread," which to him was his daughter's love.

Had Constance lived with a mother, she would probably have heard unflattering remarks as to her non-matrimonial propensities. Women must either love their daughter's society less than fathers, or be more ambitious, for their establishment in life seems to over-rule all desire to make companions of them. Some will say it is unselfish on the mother's part—so be it—let it rest there without analysation.

Of her father's pecuniary affairs Constance heard nothing ; he drew a cheque on his banker

for her periodically, which amply supplied her wants and those of Miss Milner ; his house-keeping was kept up and bills paid by the house-steward, whose office adjoined the farm buildings ; but as to whence the money came, whether any were invested for her use, or what would be her portion in after-life, were thoughts which never crossed her mind.

She was on a visit again to Lady Bridlynton, where Major Somerton left her to enjoy a season of variety, and to hear a favourite of his who was shining at the opera. She had this time not wished to leave home, and though no fear had troubled her, something prompted her to leave Miss Milner at "The Dales," who very soon wrote :—

" MY DEAR CONSTANCE,

" I do not wish to alarm you, but I should like you to come home. Your father appears to be well, but he falls asleep in a sudden manner, and I cannot divest myself of a feeling that it is right for you to be near.

" Ever faithfully,

" MARGARET MILNER."

Lady Bridlynton tried to laugh away the thought of Constance leaving London on such premises as that letter. "Foolish old maid!" she said; "I suppose your papa forgot her existence, and she is offended at his falling asleep with her in the room." But Constance knew Miss Milner was not a foolish old maid, nor did she like to hear of the sudden falling asleep, which was unlike her father's habits.

His joy at her return amply compensated for the little disappointment natural to youth and beauty, for she was taken away from gaiety and admiration; but as if without bounds his happiness expanded till he seemed to find Paradise at "The Dales," and an angel at his fireside, for he grew strangely chilly.

Constance awoke to the blessedness of her life, added to the conviction that a change was coming. She saw how little of earth her father had; a physician was called in, who felt his pulse and went away. In an interview, however, with Miss Milner, he shook his head and spoke a few words, and left the house with regret that his power extended not over such a matter.

Constance was always with her father ; his face became heavenly in expression ; she saw he was ready when the signal came to lose his hold and near the better shore.

One evening she and Miss Milner left him, to walk for some minutes on the lawn ; he was calmly sleeping in his accustomed arm-chair in the study.

They came in and he awoke.

“ Constance, they will say I have wronged you, my darling. I see now I have been selfish. I should have put my affairs into some one’s hands, for your sake ; you must forgive me, my child.”

“ Father,” she said, imploringly.

“ I have lived on ‘to-day,’ Constance, and lived happily ; this moment reveals that ‘tomorrow’ you may suffer for it. I have been thoughtless.”

“ Do not be anxious, dear papa.”

“ No, I am not anxious, Constance.”

“ Do not think. Night is not a good time for you to think.”

“ No, my Constance, there will be no more night. Mine has been a happy life since you were

born,—nineteen years of perfect peace ; they have blotted out all the others. ‘No more night ;’ it seems to me the most beautiful idea of heaven, the fondest idea the Christian can dwell upon. ‘No more night.’”

“Papa !” Miss Milner saw it all, and left the room to send for the physician.

“Dear Constance, I have never spoken of my early days ; but at this moment I can cling to the hope engrafted at my mother’s knee—the confidence that Christ died to save us. I can lay my sins on Jesus ; my child, you have been all that a daughter could be—you have made my life all light and peace. No more night——,” he murmured, and closed his eyes.

They came in by the open glass-door together a short time after—Miss Milner and the doctor ; he glanced at the placid lips, and knew that the closed eyes were looking inwardly upon the radiance of Heaven.

Constance was not of the make of woman-kind who seek refuge from the woes of life by fainting ; nor was she of the lachrymose order, who can cry out all their grief ; she was very quiet, orderly, and even happy. Yes, Con-

stance was even happy ; his words were ringing in her ears, no joy-bells could give such refinement of bliss, such perfect happiness ; the sweet conviction that he was gone to eternal light diffused comfort in her heart, for she loved him truly, dearly, with devoted and unselfish affection.

Such was the Constance Somerton, to whom Lady Oakbury wrote in her various tempers, in former days, in sorrow, in anger, and now in happiness ; fortunately for her, circumstances had presented so safe, so true, so good a friend—for Elfie, with her ill-directed youth, her strong, unfettered, spectre-haunted mind, which, tempted to make rash resolutions, might have produced baneful consequences, had in some degree changed her character, since she yielded to the honest heart and kindly nature of her husband, instead of presenting her wayward and stubborn will, as she would have done, but for the loving influence of Constance.

CHAPTER X.

DRIFTING ALONG.

PEOPLE said there never was a more changed individual than Sir Thomas Oakbury after his marriage ; they kindly professed to have pitied his loneliness before, though he never seemed to be aware of the weight of it ; his present condition could not evoke pity, so his neighbours talked of change. With a sufficiently well-educated wife, of good birth and appearance, whose bonnets and gowns were of the true stamp and latest fashion, a most comfortable house, such gardens that flowers were produced in masses which looked like immense basketsful, gravel walks and grass plots beautifully kept, they might, if disposed, now envy him ; but let us hope none did that.

Elfie had no great love of flowers, but she looked at them, and walked amongst them, and occasionally gathered some to send to Pierre Delorme, to whom, with fruit and vegetables, she sent a supply from time to time.

She was choosing some one fine summer day, when her husband joined her.

"Elfie, I wish you would ride with me ; it is not too hot to-day."

"It is not hot, certainly ; will not driving do ?"

"I want to see you mounted again. You have never ridden here. I cannot understand why ?"

Elfie blushed and hesitated.

"I see ; you mean to ride only in Rotten Row."

"No, that is not it, indeed."

"You shall even ride Aladdin ; does that bribe you ?"

"No ; I think he is almost the cause of my obstinacy."

"You do not care for him ?" said Sir Thomas.

"No, not now ; but—it feels like a con-

fession—I have kept his picture. Teresa hung it in my sitting-room, but I thought you would not like to see it."

"I expected to see it—hoped to see it, in fact—and thought you would be pleased at the purchase of him."

"How good and generous you are," said Elfie.

By his rational line of conduct he contrived to make his wife feel that he was her benefactor in a great measure, making her mind at ease completely for having her ; his favourite vision was realised, and he had no jealousy, no annoyance, and he was fully convinced that his wife renounced all others.

Inasmuch as it resulted from so many painful feelings, Elfie did not give way with regard to Aladdin ; but Sir Thomas, with real generosity, did not urge her to break what he saw was a firm resolution, and acceded ; further, he gave up riding that day himself, and drove with her.

Leaving the flowers herself, as they passed through Balding for Pierre, Mr. Meadows was visited, and asked to join in a visit to a family

at some distance. It was always difficult to get away from Mr. Meadows' house, where he had so many curious things, pictures, and pleasant stories to recite, and he had a trick of speaking to Elfie in Italian as she handled mosaics of rare workmanship, or cameos, or drawings of faun or temple, that the time slipped away, and Sir Thomas saw the bright little bark on the full tide of prosperity sail along, and he felt triumphant. It was more to him that Elfie pleased his friend Meadows, than if he had seen her brilliantly successful in the world of fashion, or reigning the acknowledged queen of the London season.

The wise man could rejoice in the present, and wait with decent patience for what might yet come—Mr. Meadows shared their carriage, and the family whom they set out to see, being from home, other visits were proposed, and it grew late before they reached The Chase.

It was beyond the usual dinner time, so to shorten the distance, Elfie said,—

“Let us go by the Leadale Woods.”

"I fear the road is too narrow."

The coachman thought the saving of four miles might compensate for tremendous disadvantages, so the word was given to try.

The long, narrow opening gave a beautiful vista ; and Mr. Meadows justified the opportunity by talking of arches, Norman and Saxon, and architecture in general. He spoke as if floods of emotion welled up from the depths of his learned mind ; and his two hearers listened, amidst the silence of the old woods, to stories of high hopes and dreams, and conflict, ending in repentance, of men whose works remain because copies from dear nature,—men who strove, endured, and died, to live in history,—of other evil efforts, of pride, and the fall of it.

"Now, then !" said the coachman, at some obstruction, "So ! stop !" but the horses reared and were terrified.

"What is this ?" said Sir Thomas.

"Do not stir," said Mr. Meadows to Elfie, but all did stir : the bank was high, the frightened horses quite unmanageable. Agitation at length reached a climax ; the carriage was

overturned, the horses freed, and then all looked around to discover the cause of so much unwonted excitement.

The servants were busy with the trembling animals. Sir Thomas watching, with lover-like eyes, lest Elfie were injured ; all her magnificent wavy fair hair had fallen about her, and her bonnet was not doing its accustomed duty ; but her eyes, in which some tears had glistened during Mr. Meadows' long harangue, turned, with something so like love, towards her husband, that he forgave the source, be it whatsoever it might, as he strolled with her along the wood path.

The horses had backed some distance, and it took several minutes to walk far enough to see in the distance three persons in earnest colloquy.

"One is Mr. Meadows," said Sir Thomas, inquiringly.

"I think so," Elfie gasped.

"My dear, what is this ? Are you ill ?"

It was a sharp, fierce struggle ; Elfie gained the mastery, and gulped it down.

Sir Thomas put his arm round her for sup-

port, but she resented it for one moment with the old wayward gesture.

“Do not leave me,” she said, in a peremptory manner, when Mr. Meadows beckoned for him to go.

Was her love a fond illusion, vanishing? Could the tide, so full an hour or two ago, have turned?

A moody silence followed; they could hear the voices of the people distinctly.

“And what do you propose to do?” said Mr. Meadows.

“A vessel will sail to-morrow from Plymouth; we can take berths in her.”

“Well, as our way is the same, and we have a lady, perhaps you will have the goodness to stand aside with your cart, my good sir.”

“The cart is mine,” said the woman, “hired by this man; and I have to go with it in order to bring it back.”

They dragged the tired donkey up the bank, and made way for the carriage to pass. The man looked out from his place of concealment behind a tree, and Mr. Meadows arranged matters for getting home. The harness had

suffered, but such temporary fastenings as would ensure safety being made, the party made a start.

Elfie sat up ; she had distinguished a voice, and the old time flowed back upon her ; she would see now if it were possible to have been mistaken.

Reaction set in ; she felt bitter again and miserable ; but, yes, calmly, she looked at the man who stood a little from the road ; it was the face she had seen at Lausanne.

Those were the eyes which she first noticed in the shop in Regent Street, when Lord Rencliffe met her whilst Teresa was being photographed.

“ You were terribly alarmed, Elfie.”

“ Yes ; it took my breath away.”

“ It was an abrupt interruption,” said Mr. Meadows. “ I misjudged that man at first.”

“ How do you mean ? ”

“ I thought he was going to beat his wife.”

“ And you went forward to be her champion ? ”

“ Scarcely that,” said Mr. Meadows. “ I do not feel sure the man is after any good now.

He did not mean to show, trying to hide himself in the cart, till I got him to rouse up."

"Then he was lying down, and so puzzled the horses ?" said Sir Thomas. "I cannot account for their being so restive at a poor jaded donkey."

Very soon they reached the lodge, and drove up Oakbury Chase as the summer evening sun tinged everything with gold and purple, and the perfume of flowers met them, and, as the hall door opened, the welcome fragrance of dinner ; for the delays had been numerous, and the hour had passed long ago at which they were expected.

CHAPTER XI.

BREAKERS A-HEAD.

Mr. MEADOWS consented to be driven back to Balding that night in the dog-cart, though he frequently preferred to walk after dining at the Chase.

He had resided for many years in the old town, and witnessed numerous alterations and some improvements.

From boyhood he and Sir Thomas Oakbury were friends, and the long years only increased the pleasure each had in the other's society.

Years ago they had travelled together, and when The Chase came to Sir Thomas, and he began to live there the greater part of his time, Mr. Meadows appeared at Balding, and looked at house after house, lodging, and hotel, but could find nothing to suit him.

At length, after raising the hopes of house-agents and landlords, he resolved to build one for himself, and purchased a piece of land on the London road, the more aristocratic part of Balding ; further from the river, and consequently from the wharves and storehouses, for barges and canal-boats were then used entirely at Balding ; the railway came in after-time as near as Rencliffe Bridge ; but only within the last year or two, has Balding Junction been added to the pages of Bradshaw.

When Mr. Meadows came, churches and chapels were abundant. He concluded the population must be remarkable for piety ; but Baptist, Wesleyan, and Methodists all built for themselves, and new erections multiplied, without diminishing the attendants at the three Established churches.

Religion, without persecution, seemed to be the fashion at Balding, and denominations flourished in liberty of action and sentiment.

The town was thriving ; tax-gatherers and landlords did not meet with difficulty in obtaining their due, nor did the "Gazette" publish names from that place ; bankrupts were almost

unknown, and the demand for labour met with supply. Poverty and wrong existed without doubt, and perplexities and failure ; but still, though not Utopian, Balding flourished.

Mr. Meadows finished his house—finished it with care and neatness which could not fail to please, arranged his plot of ground with knowledge, and very soon made it produce fruit and flowers of finer kinds than hitherto seen in Balding. It had a southern aspect, warding off too much sun with green Venetian shutters and handsome draperies, the whole having a cheerful home-like look. Week followed week, and nobody joined Mr. Meadows. Curiosity had been on tip-toe, his servants could not reply to any questions, being all engaged in Balding, and year began to succeed year, and the same two men were about the place, the same cook, and even the same housemaid, who showed more signs of the lapse of time than any of them, being at first a simple, pretty-faced girl, a niece of the cook, but a few years changed her to a large, tall, stout woman ; her work was well accomplished, or her master would not have retained her.

Mr. Meadows seemed to care not for acquaintances ; the clergymen, the doctors, the lawyers, and some of the gentry round about, left cards at his door from time to time, and occasionally some one was admitted, and found a courteous, well-read, elderly gentleman, who spoke upon the affairs of the day, but never seemed to be sufficiently intimate to make family matters his topic ; he never mentioned wives or children. “Family well ?” was his only acknowledgment, if he knew such to exist ; yet everyone liked him, and the wives and children all felt pleased when on rare occasions he returned the husband’s or father’s visits.

Mr. Meadows gave agreeable dinners too ; his dishes were well cooked, his wines excellent, servants attended with a quiet, well-regulated manner ; and since Elfie came to the Chase, she had two or three times presided, and ladies young and old found the house extremely attractive, and would drive ten or twenty miles with pleasure to visit Mr. Meadows. Of his domestic history no one ever heard ; people wondered he did not marry, or had not married, with the impertinence which

the world allows, and which permits questions to be asked behind a person, which are utterly impossible to his face, for one cannot transgress in society, or pass the boundary line ; Mr. Meadows was all politeness ; he spoke well, he read well, and was called upon to lecture to mechanics at their institution, or to read papers at the Literary Society's meetings, which he did, and gained applause ; but in all, he maintained reticence with regard to his private history, or anything concerning his inner self.

Lady Oakbury was welcomed as a great acquisition to this part of the county. After leaving Lausanne in the autumn that she spent with Constance near, Elfie went to Florence for some months, and Mr. Meadows joined his friend Sir Thomas there, where the daily visits to pictures, churches, or statuary, with so able an informant as Mr. Meadows, opened her mind to their beauties, and made her lean on the opinion of her husband's friend with something almost daughter-like.

She was quite at home, therefore, in his house, and when he gave musical parties Elfie

consented to play with precision the opening piece.

"Thank goodness," she said, smiling, "my turn comes first, and will soon be over."

"I wish you enjoyed music."

"Yes, so does Sir Thomas, but it is not in me. I wish you would let me off my share in the performance ; it is almost an insult to your guests to give them my barrel-organ 'March in Faust,' or the 'Sultan's March,'" said she.

"You play them very well."

"Yes, I wind myself up, and keep going," said Elfie.

"I will accompany you on the violin."

"Oh, no, save your talents for those who know how to appreciate them. I will play a piece of Beethoven for your concert, which I know well, and do not fear. I promise not to get out of order."

Mr. Meadows' fine ear detected what was lost to many in Elfie's performance—that it was all practice, pure mechanism ; she had no poetry in her touch, but she read correctly, and minded every mark on the page with diligent care, as if a strict music-master were beside her,

and the effect was general satisfaction. But Mr. Meadows reserved for the last the piece of the evening—after various duets, solos, and general exhibitions of his friends he would play for them, and as he played he told his own story.

People might think him reserved or shy, but he had a heart—a soft, warm, tender heart, too ; he could feel and sympathise with others. He was a citizen of the world ; he could bear and forbear, face the wild storm, or listen to the gentle zephyr ; he had lived and loved and suffered ; the greenest grass is known to grow upon graves ; and as he played on, with a finished touch, one could tell that care had eaten into his heart's core, but that he had not succumbed to trouble or sorrow ; he had struggled with the waves and gained solid ground, and stood now firmly, all the better for his battle. The waves had rounded off the sharp corners, and all rough excrescences ; he was smoothed and polished, and beautified by his trials, as they become, who accept the waitings and disappointments of life, with the resignation that acknowledges Divine Will.

Mr. Meadows felt strong interest in Pierre Delorme, and would stand watching his chisel for many an hour. Pierre had played the man, he had struggled with want; the gaunt wolf, poverty, had stared him in the face. His dreams of high art had not vanished, but he knew he must come down to a more every-day level to live. He had succeeded in rendering the last moments of a delicate mother comfortable, and even joyful; for she left him, knowing that he would rise in his profession.

He had been long enough in England to speak fluently, and though when he first settled at Balding he said to Mr. Meadows, with a sad smile, "I have renounced fame," a few years of prosperity changed his sentiments, and he was now as busily seeking that goddess as any who dread her ill-usage and court her cautiously.

It has been said Mr. Meadows drove home in the Oakbury dog-cart on the evening after Elfie recognised the man in the narrow wood road.

She went to her room after having, with a strong will, passed the evening as if nothing

had occurred to shake her nerves. Teresa, alive to all her peculiarities, saw that she was vexed and discontented, but the Italian was accustomed to her moody silence, and went on with her arrangements and her usual chatter.

“La signora is fatigued,” she said, “and something has frightened her, la poverina,” and she tried to soothe her mistress during the “pettinatura.”

It was generally a comfort to Elfie to have her long hair “combed” and softly brushed by Teresa, who, like all Italians, had an affection for fine hair, but this night so completely did the nervous system preponderate that, physically, Elfie could not bear it.

The sound of the brush irritated her beyond control; she dashed it away, and burst into a gust of piteous sobs, as if the most miserable and ill-used child.

“Ma, signora!” said Teresa, appalled by the fury of her sorrow or temper, for lately the spirit had been more cheerful. “But, signora, what is it? you are ill, your head aches; I am rough, dear signora.”

Words came in the middle of choking sobs,
“Non e niente, Teresa mia, perdona.”

Teresa, like a wise woman, was silent; this grief must arise from some “little rift” in the domestic horizon; she could do nothing but help her lady to undress and lie down; but she was not unfeeling, and determined to watch for “cruelty” on the part of Sir Thomas, which she felt could alone account for such terrible bursts of sobbing.

“Felice notte, signora;” and as Elfie tried to reply, a fresh *accès* choked her, and Teresa was alarmed, and going towards the bed, proposed to send for a doctor; this had a wonderful effect; Elfie sat up, put her arms round the woman imploringly, and finally burst into tears—good, safe, wholesome crying—a rare and wonderful relief to her overstrained nerves.

Teresa became satisfied, and promised neither to send for the doctor, nor to mention this fit of emotion, but Sir Thomas saw the traces of tears next morning, and could not divest himself of a feeling that hurt him in the wood, when his wife would not suffer him to leave her; he tried to see it as the effect of terror, but

Elfie was not a timid girl, neither was she of delicate health ; but on this day she did not look well, and when he asked her to walk out, she at first refused in a short and pre-occupied manner, but relented, and in a few minutes after said,—

“ I *will* walk with you, too ; that is, if you allow me to change my mind.”

She was always better for walking. Muscular exercise was the more needful to-day, when her mind had wandered back to the dark source of indignation, for this was her trial, she would feel *indignation* that she should be troubled with a secret.

Afraid lest notice should be taken, Elfie talked of all sorts of things, but the effort was visible, and at last her husband said,—

“ You are not yourself to-day, my Elfie, and I am too honest to pretend that I do not see it. All depends now, my wife, upon confidence and mutual trust : until yesterday I was full of hope.”

“ Oh ! do not go on,” Elfie groaned.

“ I must, my dear one. I have not asked for love, Elfie, but I find I have expected it. We

were growing very dear to each other, and, perhaps, without accidents or injudicious memories, might yet do so; but that there yet exists a something is so evident that I cannot keep it to myself."

"You are so good. Oh! do not doubt me; only love me still."

"Love you still! What can there be to make you say this?"

"Oh!" said Elfie, flinging herself on the soft turf beside him, "if I could only trust you to love, and love, and never doubt, to love abundantly, to love enough to cover all my faults, and to bear that I must keep one thing from you, I should be safe, and I could bear it."

She sat before him, and hid her face with her hands. He stood surprised at her passionate appeal; and yet the "one thing" pained him. She continued, after a pause,—

"What can I do?" she said, and her voice told of agony within. "What can I do to make you believe me? Indeed, indeed, the thing I have to bear does not concern myself."

"Can you not tell me what it is?"

"Sir Thomas Oakbury," she said, rising, "I suppose it is too much for mortal man to be asked to love his wife so much as to soften for her the burden of a secret."

He longed to ask if the secret concerned Harrold Rencliffe, but he forbore, and it was well; the reply would have stung him. Elfie walked on now, hard and fast, before him; the moment was gone by; she was very good at the moment she asked him to love abundantly, and could he have taken her to his arms that moment, peace and happiness must have followed; but he hesitated; he could not trust her "all in all;" she saw it, and knew that he suspected her heart was not all his.

He followed her, echoing her words.

"I suppose it is too much for mortal man to be expected to love a woman so as to soften for her the burden of a secret," he muttered; and added, "I suppose it is. What right has she to have a secret?"

It was an uncompromising edict of conjugal authority, but he knew he could not force Lady Oakbury to divulge this secret. He felt a pang of unutterable regret that such must be life

between them, that an acknowledged secret existed ; it was better before,—better could he have borne the doubt; but he would have been pre-eminent in excellence, and more, as Elfie said, than mortal man.

She struck off into a wood path, and as it was one with tortuous windings, Sir Thomas knew that to follow her or to overtake her might be difficult; and as he was not quite prepared as to his defence, in case she asked again for his love, he lingered, and finally returned to the house, and shut himself up in the study.

He thought over her words till his eyes became bloodshot and his lips quivered. “Poor girl !” he said ; “she craved for deep love ; she looked for Harrold Rencliffe’s wild and passionate love to fill her days, and she has the tame, fatherly care of an older man, which is not what she wishes for. Can she correspond with him ? No ; I acquit her ; I will trust her.”

He applied himself for some time to his letters and papers, read some heavy book for an hour, and then went to her sitting-room ; she was not there.

"Did Lady Oakbury come in ?" he asked a servant.

"No, sir," said the man, returning, "and Teresa thinks she must be at the sewing school, as she has had no luncheon."

Sir Thomas took his hat, and walked thither.

"Lady Oakbury was here for an hour or two, sir, and is gone."

"Which way ?"

Some one directed him, and in the flower-garden he found her.

"Elfie, you had no luncheon to-day."

"Thank you. I am not hungry."

He could not cavil at her tone : it was wife-like, and yet constrained. He had been master at Oakbury Chase for twenty years ; no one defied him.

"You must come in and take some coffee, even !"

"I will, if you wish it," she said, obediently.

She looked round to see if any spectators were visible ; but, as the coast was clear, she put her hand in his.

"I will take the coffee in your room, if you will have me there. I will," she forced out

the words, “I will do anything to please you. I will even ride Aladdin, if you wish it.”

She had offered to break her vow, but it was unfortunate ; for it was the one thing she had refused him before, and he had since that refusal allowed Harrold Rencliffe to return to his mind. “I will even ride Aladdin,” she had said, and the thought was gall and wormwood to his heart, that she had refused the other day because she could not trust herself to ride the horse with which she had hunted when in love with Harrold, lest the fact should bring him before her ; and now, piqued that Sir Thomas withheld the love for which she asked, without on her part complying as regarded her secret, she was willing to ride Aladdin as a concession.

Sir Thomas again fired up in revolt : he kept her hand, but said, in a sad voice,—

“I bought the horse, Elfie, hoping to please you, but I failed. Do not remind me of a trifling disappointment. There are plenty of horses in the Oakbury stables for you to choose from ; I am not exigeant on that score. I hoped the day had dawned when I could look

to live in happy familiarity and confidence with my wife, like other men."

"Oh, can you not trust me?" she said.

"I trust you, Elfie, with my name and fame. It is you who are distrustful."

She bent in her sorrow.

"If you could know how miserable it has made me, but I am not able to divulge the secret."

"Yes, there it is, 'the secret;' believe me I am not vainly curious, Elfie, but does this secret concern you?"

"No, not individually."

"Or those dear to you?"

She hesitated and thought.

"They are dear," she said, "because of the secret."

"Have you then to watch over them?"

"Not exactly, and yet—yes, I have."

"It is an obligation which I cannot share as your husband?"

"You cannot—Oh, if you could love me so much as to outdo all this, not that I deserve it, yet I do truly, I believe, indeed, indeed; my pride and all melts before this sorrow. Do trust

me, Sir Thomas, do believe it is nothing that comes between you and me."

"Does it?" he asked—foolish man not to take her word and her hand; but he was jealous of a secret, now that he found she could care for his love so deeply—"Does it?" he repeated; "does this secret in any way concern Harrold Rencliffe?"

"Yes, it does," said his wife; "I see you are determined to probe the wound, and give to me all the pain you can; yes, it does, and since you withhold your trust, and cannot give the love which would have made you in my eyes more than human, yes, angelic"—her eyes gleamed with anger, and yet with passionate entreaty—"could you have so loved me, I would have almost worshipped you, yes, fallen down thankfully before an idol. Oh, how I wish you had—you could have—granted my request in the wood this morning. Could you have loved on, I would not only have requited it; I tell you I should have been radiant with pride, at being so trusted and so loved, in spite of my not being able to confide my burden to you, for it is a burden, and I am bound to keep it, perhaps for

a long life, probably for years, at any rate ; but could you have loved me in spite of it, I say again, I should have worshipped you."

" As something more than mortal, eh, Elfie ? "

" Yes, something too great and good to doubt, something too dear almost. I think I might have grown too happy."

" My Elfie ——."

" No, the time is over. I accept my lot ; it will fret and weary me to bear it all alone ; but you shall never hear of it. I mean"—and she turned full upon him—" I mean," she repeated, " it will chafe me far more since you know of it, and since you have refused to take a share of it."

" Elfie ! "

" It is true. I humbled myself to plead for my own selfish sake—I could not, I cannot go beyond ; you will have to bear with me now."

He did not say a word more ; he felt he was only human, and full of a man's human desire to have the whole heart of the woman he loved, but he could not deny her his name, his hand, his countenance ; and, inspired as he was by her

unusual manner, he put her arm through his, and led her very quietly towards the house.

It was a new starting point for him, he would try not to misconstrue, should anything go amiss ; but he felt he could not understand this wife of his, whose ailments seemed to please him, too, for who is not gratified to be asked for love ?—and she had only asked for more than he knew how to give.

He took her to his own room, and rang for coffee, which Elfie sat there silently, and drank, eating bread and butter, with deliberation, for she had common sense, and knew that further emotion would only do harm. Then she left her hat and parasol, and gloves, and hastily disappeared, to return as hastily.

“ Once for all,” said she, “ let me put this up here.”

He took from her hand the wooden case containing Aladdin’s portrait ; she had a hammer, too, and a long brass-headed nail, which, as he said nothing, she drove in over the mantelpiece, measuring with her eye the relative distances.

She was standing on a chair and looking earnestly at the nail, hammering away with de-

cided blows, and Mr. Meadows came in without either of them seeing him.

"Ah," said he, "Aladdin deposed? What means this? Is he no longer permitted to grace my lady's chamber?"

"Oh Mr. Meadows!" said Elfie, jumping down.

"Allow me," said he, "to hand you the picture." She remounted and hung it, only asking, "Is it straight?"

Sir Thomas looked on with a little discomfort. Mr. Meadows said, "What has the poor fellow done, Lady Oakbury, to deserve being brought down? Has he forfeited your good opinion?"

"No," said Elfie.

"How well it is painted," continued Mr. Meadows. "Landseer is a prince of his art; the eyes are like life, he looks as if he had just enjoyed the best run I ever saw, and could tell the story too, and be ready to go away with the hounds on a capricious scent from covert to covert over a good line of country to-morrow; you can see he is not sulking over a frost or resting during summer wea-

ther, but is in high hunting order, as he was when I had to beseech Landseer to undertake him."

"Did Landseer paint him?" asked Elfie.

"Landseer! were you ignorant of that, Lady Oakbury? the painting was shown in the Academy."

Sir Thomas knocked down a pile of books, and broke a large saucer, and rising from picking them up bumped his head against the table, and down they went again, making more clatter than before.

"I did not know," said Elfie, in her honest, straightforward way, reverting to the picture, "that it was so valuable."

"As a work of art, you mean; you could surely recognise the likeness?"

"Yes, but I thought it was the work of some one at Balding."

"Balding is looking up; we have a tolerable sculptor, but not a painter of animals, like Cooper, Landseer, or Ansdell, or I am sure Sir Thomas would have preferred him before even Landseer."

"Sir Thomas?" Elfie said, inquiringly.

Mr. Meadows looked at husband and wife. There was a little mystery, and he saw it, and gave something like the ghost of a whistle.

"It is true, Elfie; Aladdin was my present."

"Yours, Sir Thomas? What a blind fool you must have taken me for all this time," said his wife, bluntly.

Mr. Meadows saw something to attract him out on the newly-mown *parterre*, and went towards it by the open window.

Elfie mounted the chair again, and took the picture from the nail where it had hung so short a time. "I have pained you," she said, "but I did not mean to reject your present. I never knew it was yours till now."

"Let it hang there, Elfie."

"Why?"

"That we may understand each other."

"No; now I know it is your present, it shall hang in the *boudoir*." She took it, and, gathering up her belongings, tried to carry them all, but could not; so Sir Thomas bore the picture, which was heavy, up to her room, and there Aladdin was hung.

"She thought, then, it came from Harrold," he said to himself; and, half rejoicing, half sorrowing, that there was a Harrold in the world, he joined Mr. Meadows in the open air.

CHAPTER XII.

A BROKEN WREATH.

YES ; Sir Thomas Oakbury stepped forth into the open air wishing there was no such person as Harrold in the world. So abstracted was his look, and long-continued thought had so pained him, that he looked like a man who had suffered illness, and he rested his hand for some moments upon his heart; but it might be the exhilaration of the fresh air that acted as a cordial, or the music that rung in his ears, “Now I know it is *your* present, it shall hang in the *boudoir*.”

Men of greater mental culture and intellect have grown morbid, and required a mighty effort to shake off the effects of disappointment, and deeply into his soul sank the cognizance of “the secret” between his wife and him-

self—but very soon his friend's voice roused him.

"Come, sir magistrate," he said, "we have a case for you;" and, lifting his head, he saw the rector and young Pierre Delorme were with Mr. Meadows, and likewise one of the men-servants, called Joseph—the one who drove the dog-cart the night before.

They all talked together; and, with magisterial patience and dignity, Sir Thomas waited to sift what he could gather, knowing from experience that he might gain the truth in that way more easily than by a formal *vivâ voce* examination.

"It amounts to absolute desecration," said the clergyman.

"And I am as sure as I stand here," said Joseph, "I met the fellow as done it."

"How can you possibly tell that?" asked Pierre.

"I know it were him, sir; he looked such a villain."

"That is no proof," said Mr. Meadows, who was the most calm of the party, and therefore laid the case before Sir Thomas.

It stood thus—that some person or persons had broken, defaced, and carried away leaves and portions of a monument not long ago erected in Rencliffe church-yard; that a wreath of beautiful floral, or a character to that effect, had been hammered and deprived of several portions which represented buds or berries, and the monument defaced and the sacred precincts abused.

As to the motive, it appeared that sheer mischief alone could account for such wicked eccentricity. The rector could suspect no one; all the parishioners were proud of the present state of order in which the church-yard was kept, and he felt extremely annoyed at the circumstance.

Pierre Delorme held a small white marble leaf, which was broken from the massive tomb, and much injured also, as if the tool used were a heavy mallet or a stone. This leaf was picked up on the High Street of Balding by a poor child, who immediately took it to the sculptor's, supposing he must have dropped it. Pierre recognised it at once, and sought Mr. Meadows, to whom he told the circumstance.

The rector, unable from a sick call to come in the earlier portion of the day, arrived at the Chase to tell his story during the time Lady Oakbury was hanging the picture, and, finding Mr. Meadows and Pierre Delorme had come about the same circumstance, he entered into the case with them very fully, during which time Joseph joined them, anxious to know, in the first place, what they were talking about, and intending only to pass them by and hear what he could ; but, as soon as he understood what had occurred, he touched his hat and told the clergyman he could point out the delinquent.

All this Sir Thomas heard, and a recapitulation of how Lord Rencliffe designed the wreaths himself, of the ivy-leaves and berries he had used in his sketch left with Pierre, how, standing where it did in the burial-ground, it had come to be the pride of the place, and many people had visited it out of curiosity, and left with words of admiration.

Joseph declared he met the villain who did it, over and over again.

“ You cannot prove this, can you ? ”

“ Well, no, sir.”

“ You must know that your meeting a man on the road is not evidence against him.”

“ No, sir ; only I feel so sure.”

“ Your feeling sure is not a sign of the man’s guilt !”

“ Well, no, sir.”

“ Do you know the man ?”

“ No, sir ; but I am sure I should know him again.”

“ Can you describe him ?”

“ Well, no, sir ; but I seem to see his face now.”

“ I believe, sir !—I beg your pardon, gentlemen,” said the coachman, coming towards the spot where Joseph stood ;—“ I believe, sir,” to Sir Thomas, “ Joseph means that man who had the donkey-cart in the wood, sir.”

Mr. Meadows said it was probable, but the rector had not enjoyed the benefit of seeing this man, neither had Sir Thomas, closely enough to distinguish his features, for he was occupied with his wife.

“ I am very sorry for the desecration to your church-yard,” he said to the rector ; “ but

what can I do ? It is singular that Joseph met a strange man, and that we saw one in the wood, and that the next day this should happen ; but it is not at all conclusive that this man carried away relics from the monument, nor are we to tax the man simply because he is a stranger—and, even if we could, can we find him ? or have we any shadow of evidence against him ? No one witnessed the act. Did the man you saw, Joseph, look different from other men ? or was he the only one you met, and alone ? ”

“ I’m afeard of no man, sir,” said Joseph, incensed at this insinuation ; “ but, as I’m a livin’ sinner, that was the man as done the mischief.”

“ This is nonsense ! ” said Sir Thomas, dismissing him. But, leading Mr. Meadows, the rector, and Pierre towards the house, they took refuge in his study, and, whilst dressing, Lady Oakbury received a message that the three would remain and dine.

Either they had talked it over, and said each of them his say, and they were tired of the subject, or they forgot it over their dinner, and

in the evening—for Elfie knew not what they came about (only supposing by their walking-dress that it was some affair of business, and that Sir Thomas had, at the last moment, kept them to dine) till they were gone, and it was reserved for Teresa to embellish the story, and give it to her mistress fresh from the servants' hall, where Joseph's idea was at once accepted, that the man who had frightened Lady Oakbury was one to dread, and the same had committed the sacrilege on Lady Rencliffe's tomb.

Elfie listened, at first feeling only half alive, with the same perception of strangeness that had haunted her the evening before, and caused her to prevent her husband seeing that man. She now sat hearing Teresa talk, but as if utterly without interest. Things seemed to creep frightfully near the secret—a bitter kind of knowledge that !

She sat perfectly white and speechless, looking so ill that, when a knock came, and her husband entered her dressing-room, and she dismissed Teresa, as she said “Come in !” he was alarmed and went to her. “ You are very pale, Elfie ! ”

"Am I?" she said, rousing herself; "perhaps I am a little overdone to-day."

He, it was evident, thought so too. He had come to tell her the case, but forebore, not knowing that Teresa had forestalled him.

Perhaps he was glad to excuse himself from talking of Lady Rencliffe, of whom he thought as Harrold's mother. He seemed to stand a little apart from the tender loving husband of a day or two ago—only a little. He talked to his wife in a subdued and gentle voice, but with a pitying, half-envious curiosity, and at himself with a scornful vexation, because he could not bring himself to "love so abundantly," as she had asked, as to tide over the knowledge that there were hidden mysteries.

He looked round the room, its draperies, its comforts, its ornaments, the picture where they had placed it that afternoon, and others, some of great value, chosen for this *boudoir* by Mr. Meadows; all seemed to remind him that Elfie had loved another before him, and that the future he had wooed and wrought for, and awaited with loving patience, was not now to bring the ecstasy and peace he had sighed for.

That self was gone. Another man stood now in his place; and henceforth he would not look for great things, but submit to the lack of joy, and take his daily life and rounds of duty as they came. He would requite his Elfie's want of confidence with kindness, but he told himself he was the aggrieved one.

The night fled away, and with the very earliest tinge of morning, peeping, blushing, throwing gleams of gold through the window-curtains, he was in his study, stepping down stairs very quietly to wake no one; and morning after morning it was thus—he could not sleep, nor rest easily in bed.

Elfie saw his health decline; her love for him increased. It was anguish to see him suffer, but she could only dream of how things might have been without that horrible injunction; of how she could have comforted him; of how they might have sat hand in hand, loving and beloved; and now a sad murmur fell on her ear as he spoke—a tone of melancholy seemed to tinge all his days.

He was not actually aware of this, but rather thought he was carrying things with a de-

meanour of natural authority—gave himself credit, in fact, for bearing his trouble hidden ; he would have been ashamed to show that he had a wound ; but his footstep was heavier, his hands were cooler, and in the early days of autumn he required a fire, and felt physically and mentally out of sorts.

CHAPTER XIII.

HEATHERSIDE.

OF course there was no clue by which to discover the brawler who had ventured to disturb the repose of the silent graveyard at Rencliffe. The rector at his own expense got Monsieur Delorme to repair the damage, as far as possible, for it annoyed him to fancy that a feud could exist between himself and even the few roughs of the neighbourhood, who might have sought to wreak vengeance on him for having so strenuously closed the footpath across the burial-ground.

He did not apprise Lord Rencliffe of what he had done ; the fact must, he felt, be magnified by writing it, and sending it by the Australian mail, so he chose rather to court oblivion, mentally resolved to watch lest a recurrence of any

such event should lead to discovering the offender.

Of the new family at Rencliffe Hall he saw very little, except that some of them appeared at church, and gave liberally when a charity sermon occurred for schools or the poor of the parish. The rector was inclined to mind his own business, which he did well, but he visited very few except the poor ; it was a large straggling parish, much neglected in former times, and as Lady Rencliffe died shortly after he came, he had little intimacy with her or her sons to regret, and as before said, of the Herberts he saw nothing.

Rencliffe Bridge was twelve miles from Balding, and further still from Oakbury Chase, which was beyond that town a few miles.

He did not seem to find Sir Joseph Parkins, and his visitors, congenial neighbours, and no man ever appeared to be more independent of externals, meaning strangers.

Every morning he had a levee, people came for advice, for medicine, jelly, soup, or some preparation which his housekeeper had pro-

vided ; in the fine weather this would take place in the garden, and the poor took pleasure in admiring his flowers, and he in displaying his wonders to them. In winter he had a fire for them in a large empty room, furnished with a long bench in front of the blaze, where they would warm themselves and wait patiently.

He was a good walker, and generally visited on foot, and took time to become acquainted with the peculiarities of the small farmers, and their wives and children ; he was much beloved, and soon treated by all this class as a valued friend.

His indulgence consisted in visiting Mr. Meadows for two or three days together, and there he saw more of Sir Thomas and Lady Oakbury. Our rector played the flute with such execution and sweetness as to surpass most performers, and took part on the occasion of musical parties at his friend's house, where he met motherly dames and fair maidens, and a physician whom he liked, named Dr. Chilworthy ; and he would win friendship as he would win souls, there was something so true about the man, so great and so peaceful.

He and Mr. Meadows together were at Oakbury one chilly autumn day, trying to divert their friend, and to rouse him to energy. Sir Thomas sat by a great fire, shivering and longing for regular winter, which he said one would not feel so much, for then hunting would begin, and out-door amusements, which warm and cheer and make a person defy the cold. The twigs from the forest trees dashed at intervals from some distance against the windows, for the strong wind was plucking off the remaining leaves with impatience, and those learned in such matters predicted a hard winter.

Elfie sent for Mr. Meadows, saying she wanted to show him a drawing, so the rector remained with Sir Thomas in the study; first a flush and then a paleness passed over his face.

"I know you are not the parson of the parish," he said, cheerfully; "but you are a right good fellow, and I can speak to you more freely than to Mr. Brown. I sometimes think I am likely to be called away, my sins, my sorrows, and my shortcomings come before me, and I try to feel no regret."

"You are right to do so, and only believe,

and you must feel that—but, pardon me, if I question you."

"Say on."

"I have studied human nature pretty well; and you, Sir Thomas, have some trouble on your mind."

"It is quite true."

"Can you not shake it off?"

"I could if I were more than human."

"Can you cast the whole care of it where we are taught to cast care?"

"I never saw it in that light before," he brightened; "if I could do that I should be all right again."

"Will you try, Sir Thomas?" said the rector.

"I will, so help me God!"

The sick man rose, took the rector's hand, and wrung it with affectionate force.

"You can be a perfect priest," said he, "without exacting confession. Come, let us see what the drawing is which Meadows is gone about;" and he led the way up to Elfie's room, where he had not been for weeks; she was sitting on a low chair by the fire, looking sorrowful.

"Well, my lady, where are the drawings?

More than one man's judgment may be given."

Elfie got up, looked at him with a keen glance, and saw how his hair had whitened, and how much thinner he had become ; she placed an arm chair for him, and said,—

" We have not come on to the drawings yet. Mr. Meadows and I were talking of you."

" And I am come up to help you."

" Then you must be better to-day."

" I am better."

Conversation flowed easily and agreeably. Elfie had felt so uneasy about her husband that she and Mr. Meadows had talked over the plausibility of getting him away from home, somewhere southward ; he proposed Pau, but she did not evince anxiety to visit her father and mother, and then they spoke of Rome, which she liked better.

Sir Thomas again asked for the drawings, and Mr. Meadows said,—

" Your wife told you we had not come on to those, and I do not suppose we shall. What do you say to taking her to Rome for this winter ? "

“ Does she wish it ? ”

“ I think she wishes it, because she thinks it would do you good ; you could join the hunting there, you know, and who knows but I might be induced to give up the dissipations of Balding, and go too.”

“ Ah, I shall need no medicine, I see, nor further nursing I trust ; would you like it for yourself ? ” he asked Elfie.

“ Yes, I think so, very much.”

“ Then we will go. Meadows, make what arrangements you like ; Joseph will settle all about the horses ; I don’t mean those sort of things, but I give Lady Oakbury *carte blanche*, and you and she may do as you like.”

The rector, saintly man, had said words to Sir Thomas which took deep root—“ all the care ” was gone out of him. The clergyman, with his ready consolation, had eased the mind of a trouble, not by curiously probing it, and questioning the sick mind as to its pains or its source, but by at once easing the weight and casting it on Him who is ready to bear all. The rector was one of the few fit to be trusted with one’s troubles, but he never sought it ; he

had not in this case the remotest idea what the trouble was—confession he knew to earthly ears would be vain—in his heart he prayed to God to ease all trial for his friend, and his prayer was heard, for he was worthy to tread the golden streets of the New Jerusalem.

For a few days Sir Thomas rallied in health, but he did not go back from his bargain with regard to Rome, and Elfie said one evening,—

“ Sometimes I fear you are giving up home only for my sake.”

“ And even if it were so ? ” said he.

“ I should hardly like it. I want you to enjoy Rome.”

“ So I intend to do. Elfie, will you make a compact ? ”

“ I think I may say I will.”

“ Will you take my hand and ask me once more to love you ? ”

Tears rained down her cheeks as she took it.

“ I think you do love me,” she said.

“ I do, Elfie, over and above your secret, be it what it may, and I am sure that, come what may, you will always be a good wife to me.”

"You may believe that," she said, "and more, that your goodness will make me what I have never been before, kinder, more in charity with others, and the very sting of the secret will go out, with your kind indulgent love to compensate me."

"My Elfie!" was all he said, but an anthem was going on in the tree tops, a murmur sweet and yet solemn. Sir Thomas Oakbury was a brave man, and having cast off that care which had troubled him, he never turned or doubted. His creed was sure, his faith strong ; he would "love abundantly," and so be "more than mortal," as Elfie's words were.

Doubting, his life was wasting away. Trusting, gave back strength, and physical strength followed ; bodily infirmity had no actual ground-work. Doctors could do him no good ; indeed, a man burdened with a load on his mind need not go to a physician ; if the latter possess common sagacity he will tell him he has found he can do nothing until the mind is set at ease ; if he fears to be disagreeable or intrusive with such information, he treats his patient to palliatives, or suggests such a course that probably some-

thing very like the secret itself comes out, in the desire to prove the impossibility of carrying out these projects ; in that case relief follows, for a confidante has some advantages ; he can see some solution probably, where to the worn-out mind of the patient inevitable destruction must be the result of his mystery.

"How shall we arrange about Constance Somerton ?"

Elfie asked this, for she had been looking for a visit from Constance.

"What do you think of asking her to go with you to Rome ?"

"It would be very nice, but could she ?"

"That I cannot answer. Write and ask her."

"She seems to have settled down at Heatherside so completely, I fear she will not move."

"Elfie, your friend Miss Somerton is a wise young woman, and makes the best of things. Show her better things, and I do not suppose she will reject them."

"I will write to-morrow, and propose it."

Elfie did, and the answer was,—

"Your project is almost a temptation, yet though I meant to leave Heatherside for a visit

to you, the ebb and flow of my life tide are so regular now, I am not sure that I should have got away.

“I am very glad you are going to Rome, you will like the winter there, and perhaps my affairs may be arranged by another year. Somebody says, ‘he must endure life-long chill, whose lot it becomes to warm himself at another’s fireside.’ I do not find it so, I am very warm and comfortable.

“Let me hear when you go.

“Ever yours,
“CONSTANCE SOMERTON.”

CHAPTER XIV.

“SHE NEVER TOLD HER LOVE.”

MAJOR SOMERTON reposed in the churchyard of the parish contiguous to “The Dales.” The property was then advertised to be sold, for no one appeared to think it would benefit his daughter to delay, in consequence of the great number of work-people who were employed by her father. Miss Milner, accustomed to business, arranged, as far as she could, for Miss Somerton’s comfort; then the two ladies bade farewell to their home, and left the place in the hands of lawyers.

A Latin inscription, on a very simple monument, bore all the record that was not in sorrowing hearts; that is, it told his name and age, and the date of his decease; but assuredly the Christian character lived, and the good he

had done to the neighbourhood would exist in living tones and grateful words.

Constance Somerton "never told her love ;" but it existed, and Miss Milner alone suspected it. This love was for Ernest Bridlynton ; and she had believed he would ask her father for her hand two years ago ; but he delayed, and she wisely avoided a *tête-à-tête* with him, since the delay was evident, and he had not proposed for her in words, only he had sought her society and chosen her on all occasions. And now, she thought, I must strive against this fancy of mine, for Ernest may have changed his mind, and I will not wear the willow.

Her deep mourning served as an excuse for her not accepting Lady Bridlynton's invitation to return to the family mansion in London : and Captain Bridlynton was also in town.

Unfortunately for him, for at that time Ernest loved Constance, and hoped to win her ; but a stop to honourable life came in the shape of Count Zadoisky, who preyed upon him, and, after three nights' gambling, he dared not think of Constance. Indeed, the new society in which

he was launched weakened his better feelings, and almost quenched his tenderness. If she rose before him, what he had left of conscience told him he was unworthy to think of her.

A comfortable income assured to Constance, she removed with Miss Milner to Heatherside Lodge.

Many reasons conspired to render this a suitable spot for her, and her life became one of great importance.

The first inducement was, that a brother of her dear father, of whom she had heard very little, except that he was a curate and made a romantic marriage, and had a numerous family well-provided for, lived somewhere in the north among the lakes.

The brothers had not met since childhood ; but, in the spring following Major Somerton's death, the Reverend Barry Somerton became established at the rectory at Heatherside, and Constance desired to seek his acquaintance and protection, and to meet her aunt and cousins, of whom she scarcely knew the names.

The next reason was, that in the village, a few yards from the high road, stands a villa

with green blinds, green gates, green palisades—wherever paint can be, it is green; and the garden in front is full of quaint and somewhat grotesque devices, oddly-shaped beds, piles of rock-work, strangely formed vases of clay or plaster, with figures here and there in terra cotta. This villa belongs to Gervase Skipton and Virginia, his wife, who is sister to Miss Milner, and older by many years.

Mr. Skipton was a small, grey-headed, neat, particularly gentlemanlike person, completely at variance with his domestic *entourage* in appearance, especially his wife—who was gaunt and angular, and so tall, as to appear gigantic beside him.

No words can express her peculiarities or her *coiffure*. We can only remember certain wooden dolls, which are now obsolete, but which had hair divided down the middle, tightly glued to the head, and then twisted into a knob on either side the face. Her cap was a sort of butterfly erection, and she invariably wore a cardinal cape. It had been the extreme of fashion in her best days, and suiting her then, she had continued it.

The devices in buttons, braids, and frills upon these capes must have occupied her leisure hours, for no dressmaker would have been guilty of turning out such performances, or such lavish waste of tassels or rosettes.

Everybody liked her, all young people made her their confidante, and boys and girls, amongst the poor, would declare there was no one so good as Mrs. Skipton.

The young people at the rectory soon found this out, and good and useful advice came from her respecting their pets or their amusements.

In years gone by, they must have been very poor; but now, either circumstances had altered, or the small accumulations of earlier years rendered them more independent.

The man, named Turner, came with them to the villa, and ever since had worked in their garden and done the harder work—one woman doing the rest. He could tell that his mistress helped him for weeks in the spring, and that Jane had orders to say “Not at home” so long, that people thought Mr. and Mrs. Skipton were absent.

One year business took Mr. Skipton to Paris

for some weeks, and now and then they both went to London : then the blinds were drawn down and the front-gate locked ; indeed, it was supposed that sometimes, during the closed condition, Virginia and the maid were rejoicing in the back premises in a large wash. But times had changed ; the maid, who had so long served them, was allowed a second to help her, and things were put on a very comfortable footing when Margaret Milner rented Heatherside Lodge, and Constance became her guest.

Lady Bridlynton, whose magnificent home was within four miles, too, of Heatherside, stayed longer this year in London than usual ; and this pleased Miss Somerton, who preferred not to hear Ernest's name. She tried to keep down the love which had grown with her happiest days, and so far succeeded, that her uncle and aunt did not suspect its existence, and her cousins were charmed with their new relative. Lady Alice Somerton found her niece a friend, a treasure : and the days passed by happily and busily, either at the rectory or the lodge.

It may seem strange that Miss Milner should

suddenly have the means of sharing a home with her late pupil, or rather, of offering a shelter to Miss Somerton, who was thus enabled to live near Mr. and Lady Alice Somerton without being an inmate of their household, or in any way becoming dependent. With Miss Milner for companion she could do very much as she pleased, and so much tact had that lady that Constance did not fear any remarks concerning Ernest Bridlynton, whose regiment was now close to London, and she felt sure that he was constantly with his family. As yet, Constance had not heard of Count Zadoisky—of his re-appearance, or his final disappearance ; nor could she suspect the amount of suffering caused by that individual.

She felt disappointment when, after the latest days of the London season were over, she yet heard nothing as to Lady Bridlynton's taking up her residence in the country, and only indirectly heard of her as being first at Brighton, then in Paris ; and that she had gone to Venice just at the time Sir Thomas and Lady Oakbury set out for Rome.

CHAPTER XV.

LOOKING BACK.

“ LOOKING back, I can scarcely believe, Constance, that Virginia Skipton and I, Margaret Milner, are the same persons as the two bright girls I see in the picture of long ago. We were brought up in Malta, and my father died there when I was eighteen, and engaged to marry Captain Landes, who had been my father’s subaltern. I do not give you details of the military affairs of the period. Colonel Milner was buried with due honours, and my mother and Virginia insisted on returning to England.

“ Of course Malta was dear to me for Edward Landes’ sake.

“ I had to yield my wishes, of course, and accompanied my mother to London, where she

threw off her mourning, and became very lively and gay, causing so much pain to Virginia, whose love for my father had been all-absorbing, that they had little quarrels over it. However, it did not last long ; our poor, vain, weak mother took cold at a concert, and died of rapid inflammation, leaving us with very small means—for, strange as it will appear, my father left all the money he could to Edward Landes, knowing that he was to marry me, and choosing to render my mother and Virginia his pensioners, rather than allow her to squander all, as he feared she would.

"For three years he wrote regularly. His regiment would be coming home ; he should invest the money in this or that ; he was full of resolutions ; and, meanwhile, my sister and I had sixty pounds a-year each, and we retired to Fordingbridge, to wait for Edward's return. To our dismay, his letters ceased, and then we saw he was gone to Ceylon, by the papers. Another year passed. I would not write ; but then came a letter in a very strange tone : 'A sort of parental authority,' he said, 'induced

him to enjoin the strictest economy, and he hoped that we should not trouble him about money matters.' Virginia was extremely angry: I could not feel that. I had left off writing, for my pride would not suffer me to write as formerly, now my letters were unanswered. But I loved him with a whole heart's force—I love him now, Constance. Age makes no difference, my dear, in perfect love, where there is one deep love in a life.

"'It is a pity,' said Virginia, 'you should wear away your best days, Margaret, for Edward Landes' sake. Give him up, and let us go somewhere out of this sad, lonely Fordingbridge.'

"'No,' said I, 'let us remain here; I like it.'

"'But you have grown thin, and the air is cold.'

"'Let us remain, Virginia,' was all I said.

"'I wonder you do not lose all hope of him.'

"I went on with my work, and said nothing. I could not bear Virginia to speak of him, as I felt she would do, if I opened my lips; and I felt so sure of him—that there was some pressure, some distress, if only he would have

told me, and let me share it. I knew he was true-hearted ; I could trust him through all these long years of absence.

“ And so we lived on our hundred and twenty pounds a-year in the cottage at For-dingbridge for ten long years, and not idly or all in vain. The poor in the surrounding country became known to us, and we were able to ease much sorrow and affliction. I might have married in that time. There was one good generous man I knew who would have cared for me, but I prevented it by letting Virginia tell my story.

“ The regiment had been removed, and, after so long a time, we ceased to note the changes. Our Army List was some years old, and we did not know that Edward had exchanged. In our straitened means we did not take a regular newspaper, but saw one occasionally, and then my eyes sought the Indian mail news, or any particulars, but with a dreamy, almost hopeless feeling, and deadened sensations for all but the old love, which, I rejoice to say, never died.

“ There was a fine breeze over the moor, and Virginia and I used to walk daily. Sometimes

the neighbour I have mentioned joined us, but I avoided his earnest eyes, and he generally spoke to my sister.

“One morning, whether Virginia had a design in it I know not, she observed, ‘It is time for the Indian mail again.’ I said, ‘Yes, I suppose it is, but it does not make much difference to our post-bag.’

“Indeed, the postman’s knock seldom caused our hearts to flutter. We had very few letters, and I had learned to suffer no more of hope deferred at the sight of the Fordingbridge letter-carrier. It used to, the pain of a sick heart, ten years ago, when he passed our door.

“The wind blew so fresh this particular morning, that it was difficult to converse ; and we two women bravely bore it for a time, till I got fatigued and sad.

“‘This is too much. Let us go home, Virginia.’

“We turned, and walked as slowly as the driving blast would let us. I was gasping when we reached the cottage.

“The postman touched his hat ; he was leaving our gate. I could scarcely breathe now

with agitation, added to the force of the gale outside. The newspaper—an English one from somebody ; no letter.

“ I sighed, and retreated ; it was the old story, the old, hopeless feeling, nothing new. This comforted me : I was going away to take off my shawl, but turning, I saw Virginia put on her spectacles, tear off the envelope, and begin to read ; then she left the room with the paper in her hand. In the entrance she met that friend I have mentioned, but did not speak ; they both came back to where I was together.

“ ‘ Your faces are quite enough,’ I said ; for at that instant I saw both knew something terrible.

“ ‘ Poor Margaret ! ’

“ ‘ I can bear it, Virginia. Is he wounded ? ’

“ It was the gentleman’s hand that pointed to a name in a list. I read, ‘ Major Landes.’

“ ‘ So Edward is dead ! ’

“ ‘ Margaret, you are too calm.’

“ ‘ God grant only that he did not forget me.’

“ ‘ I think he could not do that ; be comforted.’

“ We had worn mourning all those years, ever

since we came to England ; indeed, I suppose, it seemed more in accordance with our feelings. There was nothing to do, nothing to look forward to.

“ Daily the wind grew colder, and the moor more bleak ; but we took our daily walk, sometimes in the blinding rain.

“ Virginia could not be comforted. All the autumn I could see she had been hoping something, for she had been more active and in good spirits with the little festivals at Fordingbridge. Now her sorrow seemed to be greater than mine.

“ The blackberries had ripened on the hedges ; the annual feasts had occurred ; the children had brought her the usual complement to make into jam ; poppies and corn flowers, which she particularly loved, had all gone with the crops, now housed ; the geese cackled over the stubble fields ; the gales were fiercer, and the moor looked desolate ; the woods in the distance blacker against the sky than formerly ; the few leaves fast disappearing from the tall trees nearer our abode ; and I do think the howling of the wind, the denseness of those November

fogs, and the hoar frost, which succeeded, were unequalled ; but it was reserved for Christmas-tide to make my heart quite miserable, or, I ought to retract, for I had still the love which never dies, so it could not be misery, though I grant it was very like it.

“ Virginia heard, no matter how, of the arrival of Mrs. Landes and two children, and we foolish women never doubted that Edward had married in India, and that these belonged to him.

“ ‘ There goes the property our father saved and saved for us,’ said Virginia, in her anger. ‘ I cannot bear to think of it—horrid little black children.’

“ ‘ They may not be black, Virginia,’ I said ; ‘ there is no reason why his wife should not be English.’

“ ‘ So much the worse,’ she said, ‘ when he might have had you.’

“ Oh ! how stern and hard she grew ; she could not forgive him. ‘ No wonder,’ she said, ‘ he died. I hope the woman broke his heart ! ’

“ ‘ Oh Virginia ! ’ It was anguish to hear her talk of him. How we tramped along the moor

together, and stole back to the cottage in the twilight ! What long, long evenings those were when we tried to work and read as usual !

“ Two women lived alone ; no romance about them in the eyes of the neighbours, visiting the sick, helping the poor in the little quiet way we could, but it was a sad, dreary winter for us both.

“ Fordingbridge became intolerable, and I longed to see the widow and children of Major Landes. It was Virginia who brought it about, but I was not happier for it.

“ I had seen a tall, fashionable-looking woman, with a hard, grave face, and I feared she had not been good to him, and a little girl, with large, dark eyes, called ‘ Nemora,’ who, even in the few moments she was before me, showed herself a spoiled and disrespectful child. The boy was a wilful creature, too, but he won more love from me than the others, for he was a little like Edward, very little, but just a family likeness, which I recognised, perhaps, more in gesture than in feature.

“ Ah Constance ! we often make our own sor-

rows, after all ; our own fancies lead us to more trouble than reality brings.

“Virginia! Bitterness yielded in some degree when Mr. Skipton met us at Brussels. We were very mild sight-seers, but we passed through picture-galleries with him. He had been tutor to Edward, and Virginia made him acquainted with Major Landes’ death ; and somehow it came quite naturally and comfortably that Virginia and Gervase should arrange to pass the rest of their days together. Both could boast of years of struggling anxiety, and were glad to have each other to cling to. Mr. Skipton had a small sum annually, and neither could be alarmed at the superior fortune of the other.

“When my sister went to live at her husband’s villa at Heatherside, which you have since seen, I went to attend to your education, dear Constance, and during that time my eyes were opened to the great mistake of my life.

“I must pass over, in few words, the sorrow which neither you nor your father ever discovered.

“I told you I left off writing to Edward ; had

I gone on, all would have been well. He was distressed with hope deferred, for he had to go to Ceylon with troops. Every moment was occupied, and he misunderstood my silence ; and when in some difficulties afterwards, having debts of my father's to pay, he wrote that letter enjoining economy, we, in our distrust, mistook him. Never was man more honourable than Edward Landes ; he never made use of one sixpence of the money which my father left him ; but his cousin, unfortunately of the same name, and whose death we took for my Edward's, defrauded him in many ways ; he is dead, we will not abuse the dead. It was the cousin's widow and children whom I saw, Constance ; it was the widow of Major Landes.

"My Edward died also,—that it should be so ! —a broken-hearted, friendless man ; the sting is, that he thought I had forgotten him. But he was true-hearted ; he married no other. Dear Constance, it is a story of the noblest pathos ; he remained exiled to secure a fortune for those children of his cousin, whose mother married and deserted them.

"Our money, Virginia's and mine, had accu-

mulated where invested by him. Gervase Skipton had all particulars, and was left executor, when the real death came, for he had not heard for years that Edward lived, and now comes the touching roundabout finish.

"A French paper announced his death as Captain Landes, of H.M.'s — Regt.—which he left some years ago, to try to make more of his savings by managing land. He had exchanged for one sent out to New Zealand, when he came to believe that my discontinuing to write came of forgetfulness. Well, Gervase Skipton saw in a French paper that Edward and Lord Rencliffe, also a pupil of his, had perished at sea, while passing from one island to the other. It took a long time to make inquiries and ascertain particulars—but time does all things. My Edward was drowned, but Lord Rencliffe and others escaped. Poor Edward's papers and will were lodged in a place of safety—the prospects of those children assured, who had been sent out to New Zealand to friends of their uncle. Gervase Skipton bought the lodge for me, and, I am happy to say, some comfortable legacy from my poor

Edward to Virginia—I suppose he thought she would be unprovided for—frees her from care. There was sealed up, also, a letter, to be given to ‘Miss Margaret Milner,’ if still unmarried; a few words, written when in India, of deep regret that I had cast him off. Oh Constance! probably he meant to destroy that letter, and it lay forgotten. I am only so glad I never left off loving him.”

CHAPTER XVI.

GERVASE SKIPTON.

MANY quiet years had passed over Mr. Skipton's head at Heatherside. His wife, when she accompanied him to London, used to spend a little fortune on having light-coloured silk gowns dyed and re-made into dark ones, or old velvets and ribbons cleaned and renewed. It amused her, and Virginia could not believe but that such money meant economy; she could surely have bought one decent gown on the means used to make up old ones.

People were not surprised when, on inquiring for Mrs. Skipton, a neat maid said, dropping a curtsey,—

“Gone to Paris, sir.”

There was no denying the assertion, so the

visitor drove away ; but could he or she have looked over the garden-wall, Gervase would have been discovered, with his spectacles on, and dressed in a quaint suit of brown clothes, arranging papers of peas and beans, and seeds of every variety, Virginia, in a pair of his boots, short petticoats, and stocking-legs of her husband's dragged over her sleeves, and a more extraordinary head-dress than usual—forming a light and yet warm sun-bonnet—digging away side by side with Turner, and preparing the ground for the crops. They had a fine large piece of walled-in garden for fruit, likewise ; and Virginia believed no one could equal her method of culture, and her peculiar good luck in dropping potatoes !

She had the earliest in the market every year. It was she who weeded the strawberries, thinned the turnips, and sowed the peas in successive rows : Turner, her factotum and humble slave, Gervase, her never-failing admirer and support. He used to weed sometimes a little, in the early morning, in the front, but his wife was queen of the vegetable and fruit department.

The raspberries and currants she gathered and packed carefully, and took a note of the quantities, then sent them to the great buyer in the market-street of Berning. If Turner found the supply too large there, he had a ready-written label, and despatched his hampers of fruit to London. When the apple season came, he used to set off at night, Mrs. Skipton locking the gates after him by the light of a lantern, and reach the London fruit shop by break of day.

Thus, it was not unusual for Virginia to be up late at night, and her habits were pretty well known ; for, until the legacy bequeathed by Captain Landes, she was very thankful to be able to increase her means by the sale of the fruit and vegetables ; and Gervase was proud of his efforts. Her habits, too, were become so formed, and her time would have hung heavily on her hands but for her gardening occupations, so she continued to sort and arrange her apple chamber, and to overlook the affairs of her household, but with a light heart, knowing that her good husband would never be anxious any more about pecuniary matters.

Constance Somerton and Miss Milner were at the Rectory on Christmas Eve, when some trifling accident caused them to write a note for Mr. Skipton, who, in the ten months they had known him, had become essential, and his ready wit and common sense were always in request.

People buy apples at Christmas, and the apple-cart had just returned from the station on Christmas Eve, when a note came as before said. The Skiptons had refused to dine at the Rectory, and had taken their quiet dinner at home ; Virginia was handing her husband some coffee—a strange look came over his face.

“ I hope we are wrong,” he said.

“ Is there a bad accident, Gervase ? ”

“ No, nothing much. I will tell you fully when I come back.”

“ Will you drive ? ”

“ No ; but get me the dark-lantern.”

Gervase did not like to drive the apple-cart, though on occasions he had done so when Turner was obliged to go to town with delicate fruit ; however, he was tired on this evening,

and, at the last, did take the apple-cart. Turner was soon ready again.

“Don’t sit up, Virginia,” he said, as he left the house.

But she did sit up, and anxiously listened till midnight chimed, and she knew it was Christmas morning. Gervase did not come back.

Jenny found her mistress crouching over the kitchen fire when she came down.

“Dear lady, have you been up all night?”

“Of course, Jenny.”

“And has master not come in?”

“No; get the breakfast ready, there must be something the matter at the Somertons.”

“Are you going to early church, ma’am?”

“Yes, I think so; does it snow now?”

It was not yet quite light, but the communion service was to be at eight o’clock, and Jenny went to look out.

“Ma’am, the snow has drifted against the door, it will not open.”

“Which door? There has not been snow enough for that.”

And Virginia pushed the side door herself;

it opened outwards into a small walled-in court, they used it in winter as the hall door made the house too cold if opened often.

The women both pushed.

"There is some one against it," said Mrs. Skipton, but she did not relax her efforts, and the obstruction yielded.

Jenny screamed and ran out of the kitchen, for a tall dark outline was seen on the white snow, moving towards the road. Virginia followed, and stood at the gate. The man turned round, he seemed to have been sleeping ; he waved his hand to her, and said,—

"Good-bye, Mrs. Skipton, till next Christmas."

Paralysed, she stood and watched the receding figure ; he was tall and well made. At the turn of the road, where a high hedge and some trees broke the line of vision, he waved his hand again, and then a few steps took him out of sight.

"Did you hunt him away, ma'am ?" said Jenny, approaching boldly now.

"He is gone."

"I dare say he is some houseless tramp who

had no bed to lie upon," said Jenny, Christian charity surging up in her heart as the bells began to ring for early service.

"Perhaps so," said Mrs. Skipton.

"Don't be afraid, ma'am, he won't come back, and master and Turner will soon be here. He'll be gone to the station, it's a cold Christmas morning to be wanting a home."

Virginia put on her bonnet and shawl, and as she came downstairs Jenny handed a cup of tea.

"Get your bonnet and come with me," said her mistress, "it will strike eight by the time we are at the church."

The church was a fine old edifice, and richly decorated with emblems and joyful remembrances of the nativity. Service was just about to begin, and Virginia knelt and trembled, for she was a good deal "flustered," as Jenny remarked, and needed the influence of the house of God to calm her spirit, and it sufficed. She waited her turn to approach the table, and partake of the feast, and then she departed, not waiting to speak to any she could avoid.

The congregation at Heatherside had in-

creased to more than double its former numbers since Mr. Somerton came ; he had plenty to do at first to lay the duty before them, but it was only at first, for it soon grew upon his parishioners, and the attendance was very large.

Mrs. Skipton found her husband at the door when she came out, waiting to walk home with her.

“ Well, Virginia.”

“ Well, Gervase.”

They got home, and breakfast over, Virginia heard about the accident, a hurt to one of the boys ; but Gervase fearing the consequences might be worse than Lady Alice supposed, persuaded her to send for a doctor. Turner, indeed, went with the light cart, and then being sent to get supper, it grew so late that the Rector insisted that Mrs. Skipton would be asleep, and man and horse were sent to the stables ; Turner, weary enough, was glad of a groom’s bed, and Mr. Skipton remained with the patient, the boy assuring himself that in such a case his mother would go to bed.

Then Gervase heard of the man who had rested against the door in the court-yard, and he

recognised in his wife's description one he did not wish to see.

"This is very strange, Virginia, I cannot account in any way for his coming to our door, but I feel convinced it must be Zadoiski, as he calls himself; which way did he go, do you say?"

"Towards Berning; so he might not be seen by any one in the village. Whether he passed the night at Heatherside I cannot tell; he knew me, however, calling me by name, and said 'Good-bye till next Christmas.'"

"Yes, I do not think much of that, his effrontery is at all times so great; but I thought from what I heard there might possibly be a doubt as to his identity; but I have none now, I only wonder what brought him here at this season."

Mr. and Mrs. Skipton joined the great family dinner at Heatherside rectory that Christmas day. It was one of unmixed pleasure. Mr. Skipton was appointed presiding genius by Lady Alice, and dispensed gifts with a liberal hand, which he himself had selected in London at her request. Her husband first, then all her children, Constance, and Miss Milner, Mrs. Skipton, servants,

and a number of poor people received what was most pleasing or most suitable for a Christmas present, and with one accord they wished her and each other,—

“ Many happy returns of the day.”

CHAPTER XVII.

WANDERING.

DAYS and weeks gathered themselves into months since Elfie and Sir Thomas left Oakbury Chase ; but letters came from Italy to Constance written in a spirit which told of contentment, but not of returning home. She began to think they would amuse themselves till the approach of winter, when she felt sure the hunting season, which Sir Thomas missed the year before, would attract him now his health seemed to be good. Then came to her news of the death of Mr. Herbert, at or near Pau, and that Mrs. Herbert was so much happier in France than at Carsall, that she had no intention of returning, especially as her son would most likely not invite her to remain there.

It was her letter to her daughter which told

all this, enclosed by Elfie to Constance, "My mother seems," she said, "to wish to place herself further and further from my affection. I proposed to go to her, but she did not wish it; in fact, Sir Thomas wrote to offer that she should come to us at Oakbury Chase, but she says she wishes to remain where she is, and Harry is to return next year."

The round of daily life was calm all the spring for Constance; she and Miss Milner felt that stirring events were for others, not for them. The story of one was over, and for the other dormant. Constance was glad that no exciting incident occurred just at this time.

Mrs. Skipton was busy with her garden, and the people about her, and Gervase read his papers and books in his quiet study, and nothing disturbed the even and peaceful ways at Heatherside.

As a vagrant, or something very like it, the man we have identified as the same who bore the name of Count Zadoiski, was seen by Lady Oakbury at Lausanne. Constance was too terrified to notice his face; she thought he came to rob, and rejoiced at his being got rid

of so easily. In similar guise Elfie saw him again in the Leadale Woods, as she was driving home from Balding with Sir Thomas and Mr. Meadows, and Constance did not know that the same man had seen her at Heatherside, and that he was well known to Mr. Skipton ; nor did she know that, but for this man, she might have been by this time the wife of Ernest Bridlynton. Knowing nothing, it did not seem strange to the younger ladies that this man at Lausanne had received money from their hostess to return to England, and promised her that the sum he now borrowed should be repaid in London.

He did return to the modern Babylon, and for some few months had existed as formerly, after which, circumstances were against him, and he was not to be found. By some, Count Zadoiski was supposed to be dead, by others, that he was actually gone to that Siberia from which in former days he used to boast that he had escaped. Nevertheless, having tried several places abroad, and found it more difficult to hide there, the so-called Zadoiski was again in England—it would appear so far, concealed

from the eye of the law, but not moving in the first class of society.

In London gambling houses, when in the zenith of their fame, in taverns, clubs,—wherever men met with an intent to play—a handsome Pole was well known, whose run of luck became proverbial, and whose *savoir faire* was enviable.

He had letters of introduction, too, which admitted him into the company of statesmen, authors, Members of Parliament, and the fashionable world generally. All conditions of persons invited him to their houses. He was what they then called one of the “lions” of the day. The ladies found him agreeable, but none seemed to desire to ally him with their families. He was past middle-age, but yet so courteous, so well-made and dressed, that his years would not have been counted a disadvantage. But with all his qualifications, and long as he made out his pedigree, young ladies were put on the defensive by prudent *chaperones*—for Count Zadoiski was too wise to pretend to riches. He knew Poles in general are not reputed as wealthy—nor did he seek

their society, lest, he said, they should find he was as poor as themselves. It was his outspoken policy, therefore, not to affect places where his countrymen were known to assemble.

He told of his ancestral palace, it is true, and of military exploits, and what he meant to do, to reinstate Poland. But he had a mother and sister, of whom he appeared to be romantically fond, and to young ladies, he always affected to expect them soon. Rescued from Siberia, his sister Petrowa's health was recruiting in South Italy or Sicily, or some convenient place where they were never met, and this devoted son—whose mother must have been in good old age, and the sister might have grown-up sons and daughters—could shed tears over their troubles whilst he awaited them in London, hoping to take them back to Warsaw shortly.

This might be a lame story, but there was no one to contradict him, and people seemed to like to hear how he intended to fight. Besides, he never asked any one for money—Zadoiski was unlike his poor countrymen in that respect, for he well knew that, had he so far committed

himself, London society would have been closed for him.

Who forgives the friend who has borrowed money ? To get rid of an unfortunate it is not a bad plan to lend it ; he will not ask a second time, lest your anger grieve him.

Count Zadoiski was too much a man of the world to run such risks, or to appear badly dressed at the table of his acquaintances. The world must judge by appearance. His tailor's bills did not trouble his host, but a shabby or ill-cut coat would have displeased some of his friends : and who concerned themselves about his payments ?

He affected also a passion for flowers, and the bouquets with which he ingratiated himself into the favour of the ladies of houses he found it to his advantage or convenience to be seen at, were worthy of price, and evinced care and high culture on the part of his flower merchant.

Lady Bridlynton had two daughters, both married, and nothing could equal the beauty of their bouquets or floral decorations, when such could be worn in the hair. The handsome Count seemed to take them under his parti-

cular direction in the matter of flowers. "I wonder," some said, "their husbands allow it ;" for it became a subject of remark. But where could the ladies get such flowers ? Their own conservatories had nothing to equal those which the "noble exile" found for their acceptance ; and then he talked so much of his mother and sister !

It was reserved for Ernest to make London uncomfortable to Count Zadoiski, by discovering in him a noted character, known in Vienna as Signor Vervi. There his *rôle* had been a persecuted Italian, and there he played for months his most profitable game.

Ernest was visiting an acquaintance of his at the Embassy at Vienna, and met Signor Vervi frequently, whose powers as a linguist were fair enough to deceive many.

He was a complete compendium of knowledge concerning Vienna, and escorted English and French ladies—giving information about places of interest with the accuracy of a paid guide. He professed the extreme of respect for the old city, and could point out the confines, give the date of the cathedral's dedication to

St. Stephen, the height of the steeple, and the weight of the great bell cast from one hundred and eighty Turkish cannons. Too numerous here would be a list of his accomplishments. He professed some knowledge of the 12,000 MSS. in the library of the Imperial Palace, and seemed to have extracted the knowledge of 300,000 volumes.

The siege which the Revolutionists sustained in 1848 was a favourite topic of his, but every one against the Turks seemed to dwell in his memory without confusion ; in fact, Vienna was his strong point, and all its history, from the period of its being the quarters of a Roman legion, passing through the hands of Huns and Goths, till threatened by the great Napoleon, and up to the Congress of Vienna, and the moment when Signor Vervi held forth in the gardens of the Schönbrunn, and somewhat bored a portion of his audience, Ernest Bridlynton in particular.

Small wonder, then, will be felt at Ernest's surprise, when next in London, to find Signor Vervi at his mother's house, under the title of Count Zadoiski.

It was a ball night, and Ernest, unable to bring proofs, kept this little affair to himself, and saw Zadoiski talk to Lady Bridlynton and his sisters, and their friends and husbands, with easy familiarity.

Early that morning he, having what men call a “little affair” that worried him, had paid a visit to his mother in her dressing-room. Throughout his boyhood, and until within the last year or two, she had been liberal with money ; and he knew his elder brother was not extravagant, and that her jointure was ample.

“Mother, I am come to lay a case before you ;” and he stated the facts in a few words.
“Now, will you help me ?”

“I cannot, Ernest ; it is not in my power,” she added, in so severe a tone, that he felt annoyed. One in debt is not disposed to feel patiently and charitably ; he had applied to his mother in his necessities, and got a refusal.

For some minutes he felt reckless, vexed that he had shown his condition to her ; but it did not appear to sink deeply into her mind —she was too much absorbed with other things.

“You will come to-night, Ernest ?”

“ If I can, mother.”

“ Your sisters will expect you.”

He went to the opera with a friend of his, a lady who wore a pretty bracelet—his gift—upon her arm. Either he was what she called “ cross,” or Ernest himself “ out of sorts,” or the lady was much occupied with Grisi—they said very little ; and when a brother officer, whom he knew, entered the box, he resigned his place, bowed, and left. His servant was outside, waiting for him.

“ To Lady Bridlynton’s.”

Up the lighted staircase, and through the ante-room, he walked, to where dancing was going on, and to where his mother was standing.

“ How good of you to get away,” she said.

“ I am rather late,” was his reply.

One of his sisters found him.

“ You are the best brother in the world.”
And she took his arm, and danced the next waltz with him.

He watched Zadoiski, and was sure he was Signor Vervi.

“ Adelaide, who is that man ?” he asked his sister.

"Do you mean our count? he is delightful."

"I saw him at Vienna. Bridlynton knew him, but not by that name."

"You may have been mistaken. We are so fond of him, he dines with us nearly every day, and treats us as if we were quite dear to him."

"Very kind, on his part. I do not like him, Addie."

"You dear, jealous old thing. He gave me my bouquet, and I dare say you think it a bad one!"—she held up a small floricultural prize.

"Well, how are you getting on, Ernest?" said the other sister—a laughing, dancing matron—coming up with her partner, whom she then dismissed.

"He is jealous of our Pole!" said Adelaide.

"Of course he is—everybody is."

"I know too much of him," said the handsome brother, who at the same time determined to know more.

"What do you mean by too much?" said his elder sister.

"I met him at Vienna, and he had another name."

"Oh! stuff and nonsense; you met some

other old Pole—not our delightful Zadoiski. I believe, if my little daughter were old enough, Elmington would make her marry him, though he is an oldish creature, but very pleasant."

"How old?"

"Dear me, how jealous men are! Well, I suppose he is old enough to be your father, monsieur."

Ernest laughed. "I did not mean the man, I meant my little niece—the young lady whose matrimonial prospects are already the aim of her mother's existence!"

"Exactly so: my daughter will be three next June."

"It is time I should see her again; she will have forgotten me."

"I really do not like to flatter you, but as yet her recollection of you is lively, especially as she has a happy knack of investing you as the hero of all her nursery stories. You are the son, for instance, of the renowned Mother Hubbard; and your likeness to Jack Horner, in her pictorial history of that celebrated young man, is incontestable!"

"I am much obliged ; now dance this galop with me."

"We shall have you in *Punch*," said Adelaide, "as the good young man who comes to his mamma's ball and dances with both his sisters."

Ernest smiled, he was too good a son and too affectionate a brother to mind this threat, and he whirled away with his married sister, causing jealous pangs to several of her ball-room friends.

Count Zadoiski vanished before the rooms thinned that night ; but later, when it would have been well had Ernest sought rest, they met, and so cleverly did the count cover his disguise, that Captain Bridlynton half wavered.

Any one who is cool headed in London may stand a better chance of escaping detection than elsewhere. Zadoiski had courage enough to face Ernest without betraying any sign of nervous desire to avoid him. He knew that mere absence now would create suspicion, so they met, and more than once.

Ernest tried to disbelieve his own convictions, and having made that effort yielded to the

temptation and played, at first winning largely from the Pole, who expressed sorrow and even vexation, for he had his wits about him, and knew that Captain Bridlynton would look for such gain as his, as the usual course of events. Who does not know that a new hand always wins, and that the lay figure so often described bears his losses with perfect equanimity, only biding his time when the novice finds to his horror than he is ruined.

Ernest was not a novice, and it suited Zadoiski to rather become his victim ; they played and played with equal luck for some time. Had something of conscience that Ernest was in his power improved the count's play ? he played fairly that night for once, whether morality or fear were the motive. But Ernest had liabilities. He returned for some consecutive nights, and as may be expected, his class of troubles changed, but not his liabilities.

The Captain Bridlynton, who loved Constance Somerton, was a handsome, fine young man, whose life, if not blameless, possessed no flagrant faults.

The present Ernest had fallen into the snare

set for him. Night after night improving in play, he became, without knowing it, a tool in the hands of the Pole, whose aim was high, and the well known character of Captain Bridlynton was a guarantee for his introduction to one or two noblemen, which he had not yet found means to attain !

Ernest of course, for he was human, found himself intoxicated with the new life, and his mind dwelt less upon former pleasures ; he had no power to resist the devil, with Zadoiski by his side.

Ernest lost little money, but he lost his self-respect ; and his hope of being accepted by Constance gone, he felt he was slipping down fast.

His friend had a richly bound and extravagantly ornamented book of autographs, and Ernest was at his request made to ask for signatures of men whose names or talents ranked high in the world's estimation.

One night a certain young lord was with them, a sort of millionaire ; they supped richly, and champagne, which Zadoiski professed to dislike, flowed freely.

The young lord lost that night a moderate

fortune to the Pole, and Ernest, thrown off his guard, or restored to his former self for an instant, saw things as they were. He gave his shoulders a little shrug, perhaps, and went away—too wary to make observations that his eyes were suddenly opened.

The next day Zadoiski sought Ernest, begged him to sup with him once more ; he must leave London the next day, for his mother and sister had arrived in Paris, his aged relative demanded his presence, &c.

The young lord, too, made him jealous by his attentions to a pretty *protégée* of the count, who usually, when the suppers took place at his hotel, presided ; she was named Rose Dymond, and seemed to prefer Ernest to all the world.

Zadoiski left London next day, the young lord loud in his regrets ; Ernest indebted to him for having so played the night before, that he had money in his pockets to defray all his debts, but—he had promised to marry the pretty ballad singer, who was ready to give up her profession, and to receive education for his sake, and lead a quiet life for him alone.

He had assured himself it would be a pleasure to superintend the education of his Rose, but with the reason, which returned to him in some days, came the fact, that he would lose his sisters' love as well as the respect of Constance, and that he could never venture to produce such a daughter-in-law to Lady Bridlynton.

He paid off his debts, with a melancholy that quite afflicted his creditors. His fate was sealed. Nor was Rose his only source of regret ; his good-nature led to life-long sadness, and years of bitter repentance.

Forgery was one of the many accomplishments of Count Zadoiski, and he made himself master of more than one paper of importance, for which a written order was produced. Trust monies disappeared, iron safes and strong boxes were no impediment ; nothing was too daring or too difficult for our friend to effect. It became his most intense pleasure to work upon the gullibility of the public, and so complete were his disguises, aliases, and successes, that it would appear quite incredible, could his whole career be written.

The initiated know that in the vast Metropolis it has been possible to escape detection, and that men living principally amongst one set, are very little known to others. In London life is composed of distinct grooves, and to run from one into another is as safe as to seek security by flight. Clergymen, some known lecturers, and popular actors or singers, become well impressed on the multitude, but a man living and moving in the West End, might play the adventurer in the City, pretty sure that none of his accustomed acquaintances would be met in daily life, which flows and ebbs ; and he might drift along for months and years, without fear of recognition.

Before the fact that ruin stared the young lord in the face, or the knowledge came to others that their money had been spent for them, Ernest made up his mind that he must make the best of a bad bargain, which admitted of “no backs,” as schoolboys say.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SLIPPING DOWN.

Facilis descensus Averni, says the old proverb, which Ernest inclined to dispute ; it had gone hard with him so far, and he could see nothing likely to compensate in his future for what he had renounced.

The weekly dinner and ball had more than once taken place without him, and his mother regretted that he was unavoidably detained, and so forth.

His sisters loved him dearly ; they had been happy together in the days when there was nothing to hide. Now Ernest did not care for anything, but he looked in at Lady Bridlynton's from time to time, never making a *confidante*, however of her, since she refused him the loan he had required. She was usually

at work upon silken flowers, or canvas with beads, for she was one who promised contributions as well as patronage to fancy fairs, and bazaars of all descriptions. She would argue, when Adelaide somewhat flippantly threw down a five pound-note, saying, "There mamma, I contribute that to your charity fair, but do not ask me to work. Shall you ever forget that bit of golden tapestry you induced me to try my temper over ?"

" And it brought in some pounds, Addie, I assure you. I expect this screen will more than treble the amount I spend on the materials."

" Yes, mother, but you have patience, and were born in the days when such was valuable. I assure you, my new maid, Elise, brought her own sewing machine, and I do believe she would mend her gloves with it. She never sews in any old-fashioned way now ! "

" Can she then make up something for this bazaar ? "

" If you ask her, mamma, she may be so much flattered ; but she professes to be kept busy with me."

The other daughter, however, worked for fancy fairs, and was very dutiful and attentive when her mother held a stall ; and after dinner a display of the contributions former amusement for the guests.

The ball went off well, like all things undertaken by Lady Bridlynton. Music excellent, supper of the best, guests numerous, perfect toilettes, all according to the highest rules.

Many had left when Ernest appeared, but he bowed to his mother, and found a partner, late as it was. He watched his sister Adelaide, about whom either her husband or some one hovered. He must see her, so advanced.

“ It is growing late, Addie, and I have duty early ; the rooms are thinning too much to talk ; come into the conservatory.”

He offered his arm, and led her away, just as some inveterate dancers began again ; the curtains were looped back to give air to the room, but Ernest let them down, and then found a seat for Adelaide, saying,—

“ You are tired, and I must tell you a long story, and a sad one.”

“ My own good brother ! ”

“ No, there is your mistake : but because you are so fond, I am unwilling to deceive you, Adelaide. My mother and Charlotte care less.”

“ No, indeed, Ernest.”

“ I cautioned you against Zadoiski, but I let him lead me on. You need not smile, it is no jest, Addie.”

“ I smile because he came to say good-bye a week ago, and went to Paris ; but he told us you were engaged to Lord Somebody’s sister.”

“ Did you believe it ? ”

“ No ; I thought it improbable, because I used to think you liked Constance Somerton.”

“ That time, as all of my good days, is past and over. I have every right to relinquish your love, Adelaide, but I claim it.”

“ You are the best brother in the world.”

“ No, I am not. Yet I am engaged to marry, and it is not a matter of congratulation.”

“ Then break it off.”

“ I cannot with honesty, Adelaide. I am about to marry a person I shall not inflict on my mother or on you.”

“Then is Count Zadoiski to blame for it ? What made you say that ?”

“I am sure it is so. It is true, Adelaide, he has made me a weak tool ; more, worse than that, I have been a mere flexible fool, and this is his revenge.”

“Break it off ; get leave, and come to us for a bit.”

“I cannot, Addie. Those rides used to be so pleasant, but I have been slipping down ever since the regiment came so near to London. You see you girls noticed me, but I was not good for much, and I wanted ballast.”

“Dear Ernest !”

“Yes, I have no real good in me ; I have gone down hill fast.”

“We must get you up, dear fellow.”

“It is too late now.”

A group of people entered, and the Cotillon was over—“Good night” heard on all sides.

“We *will* get you up,” said Adelaide, rising.

“I might lose footing again ; I have no heart to try. Make it as easy as you can for my mother.”

He began to descend the carpeted stairs ; his sister stood and watched him with some anxiety in her mind ; he turned half way to say some last words, his foot slipped, and he slid—to the bottom. Adelaide ran down.

“I trust you are not hurt.” She stooped, and as he did not get up, servants closed upon him. His arm was broken.

“My dear Ernest,” said Adelaide, as her husband and a servant raised him and supported him to a bedchamber.

Lady Bridlynton came in great haste, hearing of the accident, and a messenger was despatched for François, commonly called Frenchy, his own servant, and another for a doctor.

The fracture was set, and some notes written by his brother-in-law, to ease Ernest’s mind.

“Now you must go to sleep,” said Adelaide, “for we have to go home, and it is late.”

“Will you come and try to befriend me,” he said.

“I will come, dearest Ernest, certainly ; but do not talk about befriending.”

"But I need it so much, I am not *solid*, Adelaide."

"You have slipped downstairs to-night, and shaken yourself," she said, smiling, "but you stopped on solid ground."

"You try to make the best for me; once more, caution my mother and Charlotte. I am sure Zadoiski is not a good acquaintance for any of you, and am certain he is the same man I met under a different name at Vienna."

"But he is gone. Sleep now."

"Yes, I will; to-morrow lots of fellows will come to ask for me. I am likely to remain here for some days, so shall see you, and then I must take Rose to some foreign place, and keep her out of the way."

"We will see about it."

"It is inevitable. Addie, you are my only friend. You will forgive me. My mother and Bridlynton will make things square to themselves, and forget me."

"You will change your views to-morrow, Ernest."

"No, there is no change possible. Good night, good, kind sister. You will try to take

my part, I know, but do not get into hot water with Fred about it, for I am not worth it. Good-night."

Adelaide's heart bled for the handsome soldier, and the dear brother, whose troubles weighed heavily upon her. It was very late. She almost wondered at her husband's patience, and thanked him for it.

Very uncomfortable sensations kept Ernest awake ; he had never passed a night in that house, and now it was under painful circumstances of mind and body. His mother had taken care that he should have tutors, and then Eton, and afterwards a noted "crammer" to get him through his examination with credit ; and she was well pleased with her son's mode of life and personal appearance, and even pleased at his moral character.

A mother's influence, prayers, or tears had done nothing for him ; he had never heard her voice in tender pleading, though he could recall it often and often in tones of anger, for she was inclined to tyrannise over her household at certain times.

His French governess taught him the Lord's

Prayer, and grace before meat ; but there was no chapter from the Bible or text taught in his mother's room, to be looked back upon in after years as the guide and light of his life ; no fond few words on Sunday morning, or little explanation of the collect for the day ; no sentence from the Liturgy, mentioned in such a manner that it would dwell in his mind ; and the simple faith and perfect trust of a little child were not within him. But Ernest wanted some sweet voice to bring them into action, or to apply words, which he well knew, to every emergency, as we have example in the Psalmist. David, on every occasion, has words suitable for his trouble or his joy ; how often in anguish, but more often in overflowing thankfulness.

Frenchy remained in the room with his master, and Adelaide drove through the streets in the short London night. The ball and the opera were over, and the last carriages were hurrying homewards, bearing wearied votaries of fashion, who dread the rising sun, and yet court it by late hours, and have to shade their windows to avoid its rays when at last they lie down. It is a trial to be seen in the pure, cold

light of early summer morning. Men look miserable, and regard themselves with disgust. Women, the most lovely, shrink from a second trial, having once beheld themselves with worn face, tired, expressionless face, a wreath crushed or coiffure disarranged, and gloves half soiled. Drive quickly! never mind any sort of impediments, let us get home.

Do not wait to look at that footsore woman, entering London with her flower-baskets ; or the other who, with ghastly face, begs with a lean hand for charity. You have mistaken, poor woman, the moment. It is too late, poor sister ; even the most forlorn, those, who are sought, and fed, and preached to, are gone now. The lady is as anxious to have a roof over her head as you can be. It was long past daybreak when Adelaide got home.

"I really am so tired," she said, "I don't believe I shall get up at all to-morrow!"

"To-day, I suppose you mean," said her husband, and he ordered some refreshment even then, for he had to be off by an early train ; and so Adelaide again thanked him for his patience.

He was going down to Brighton on a yacht-ing cruise, so she could not tease him about Ernest ; and as he was very good-natured, and had promised her a change at Brighton after awhile, she let him go comfortably, and retired to rest.

CHAPTER XIX.

DOWN.

THE hot days come on when London is empty, and the streets deserted, when only few of the fashionable world can be found, and these only detained by some strange events. The shops half-closed, people gasping with the heat. Ernest Bridlynton's regiment remained ; and it was on a fierce, hot morning when he married Rose Dymond, and submitted to the questioning stare of his friends.

The vehement young bride was disgusted that he would not submit to a grand entertainment on the part of her relatives, nor introduce her at once to his own ; but, fearing he might not hesitate to give up the pleasure of the wedding altogether, she became reconciled.

She had likewise expected a trip for her honeymoon—to Switzerland, up the Rhine, or somewhere according to the choice of her aristocratic husband—but again had to bear the bitter disappointment of having no trip at all. “There was nobody in town,” Ernest said to himself, nobody to run away from; when his long leave came, he promised to take her somewhere.

They furnished a little house at Brompton, and masters were engaged to come two days in the week each, to the youthful Mrs. Bridlynton, who made progress to a certain degree, and there stopped, her powers being of too weak an order to advance beyond that.

During the heat, Ernest spent as much time as he could lounging about the pretty little rooms, or eating the cherries from some standard trees, and picking the smother-flies from two or three gooseberry and currant bushes which had borne some fruit. Rose knew nothing about flowers; he offered to put up a greenhouse, but she declined; she said she “only cared for pears,” and could buy them at Covent Garden after a time; but flowers, if

she were to tend and water them, would be “a nuisance.”

He did not mention her name to anyone; so Rose had no visitors or neighbours to come and take afternoon tea or a walk with her. She grew dull in a short time, and careless in her dress, seldom appearing in anything but a frilled wrapper; and when Ernest, having seen her two or three times when she was dirty and untidy, complained, she only said, “She did not see the use of dressing for him alone.” So he did not see the use of tying himself down to the little house at Brompton, and spent his time elsewhere.

The pears that had promised to ripen for Rose were stolen; the few plums on a tree that grew beyond, dropped off; the little garden became very damp and cold, and Ernest, as well as his wife, grew heartily sick of it.

At this juncture he met Gervase Skipton one day in Pall-Mall.

“How do you do, Mr. Skipton?”

“How are you, Captain Bridlynton? All well?”

“So I believe. My sisters are away—one

at Brighton, the other in Switzerland. My mother at Lausanne again."

"She means to be at home for Christmas."

"Really? I did not know it."

"I am," continued Mr. Skipton, "just returned from Rome."

"At this season?"

"Yes; a case of identification required it."

"Identification!" seeing he was expected to say something.

"Yes. Did you ever meet one in town called Count Zadoisky?"

"Very often; he left for Paris some months ago."

"Ah, you would know him then?"

"I think so; what of him, now?"

"Only new forgeries. It is quite time his mania should be stopped; and lastly, a sum of money procured under false pretences—a mere trifle to him, five thousand pounds; but he used a signature, and a base deception, which will, I trust, be unravelled yet."

"Have you any idea where he is?" asked Ernest.

"Not the most remote. There was a Mon-

sieur Kliote, who answers the description ; but at present, our friend is not to be found, nor Monsieur Kliote either."

Captain Bridlynton recollected Signor Vervi at Vienna, but he said nothing. The whole acquaintance, as far as he was concerned individually, involved itself into pain, and Ernest thought of Rose, and denied himself the pleasure of inquiring about Heatherside ; only, as he left Mr. Skipton, he said,—

" You will be glad to get home, though your journey has not been successful. I hope you will find Mrs. Skipton well."

It was now October, rainy dull weather, depressing to his spirits. " The day was dark, and cold, and dreary," he walked home to Brompton, and as he rang the bell, his ears were greeted with peals of laughter.

" Buttons " looked frightened. It was a clear case of surprise ; but Ernest, equal to the situation, walked in.

Rose was well dressed, and raising a glass of champagne to her lips, two of the masters,—the drawing and the music-masters—were taking luncheon, and a good-looking elderly

woman, and two showily dressed girls were at the table.

Ernest stood, hat in hand; his well-bred attitude awed the ladies. He bowed.

"Oh indeed! This is mamma, and these are my sisters, come to spend the day with me," said Rose.

Ernest bowed again, but did not trust himself to speak. The two professors were profuse in bows and apologies—intrusion—thanks—and departed.

"Well, my dear, as Captain Bridlynton is come home, we may be going." All retired to prepare their toilettes.

Rose found her husband looking very sad, and his eyes had a mournful expression, when she came back.

"Fool! mad fool!" he thought, "to give up life for such a woman. It's all that Zadoisky's doing; and yet I ought not to blame any one but my own unbalanced self. I must make the best of it."

"You are in trouble," said the little wife.

"I am not very happy, Rose."

"I hear the family are to be at home for the

winter ; shall you take me to see your mother and sisters ? ”

“ Oh, do not ask it, Rose ; it is impossible.”

“ I want to go there. I like nice things, and carriages, and horses, and to drive in that beautiful park. I should be very happy there.”

“ I am sorry, Rose ; upon my soul I am sorry——”

“ And I am sorry I did not take Lord——. It was that old Pole who persuaded me to marry you, Ernest.”

“ My obligations are so deep towards that gentleman, Rose, that, once for all, they pain me.”

“ I should be useful to your mother, who is lonely, and a widow.”

“ I have not heard my mother complain, Rose, and I am not inclined to cast additional responsibility upon her at present.”

“ I little thought you were not even the elder brother. Why, Lord Bridlynton may come home any day, and where will you be ? ”

“ Alas, Rose ! where I am now ; my brother has nothing to do with me.”

"Only he takes the property. I kept patient at first, for I thought you must come in for it sooner or later."

"Patient? for how many weeks? My good Rose, who has enlightened you?"

"My mamma; and I am so angry with Count Zadoisky, that I should like to find him."

"I suspect it would require more vigilance than yours."

Rose grew very red.

"I read the *Times*," she said. "I know about the forgeries, and—you have talked in your sleep."

"Rose, do you see those people often who were here to-day?"

"Not—not very often?"

"Could you live without them?"

"I suppose I could, but I find it very dull."

"Poor girl, I believe it. We have made a very sad mistake—one that can never be rectified."

"Never?"

"Never, my poor Rose! Even my dearest sister cannot acknowledge my marriage. I

believe the best thing we can do would be to emigrate."

"I should like that. I could make your fortune, you know, if you let me sing."

"I cannot, Rose, in public; I owe that to my mother and Adelaide. Charlotte, I believe, cares less for me."

"I will go anywhere if you will only go at once."

"You are angry, I see, Rose."

"Yes, I am angry and disappointed. I married for a fine name, for a spacious, elegant mansion—if not just at present, to come soon; for servants, carriages, to have the pleasure of driving past my old acquaintances of the theatres, and feel my triumph, but—" she burst into indignant tears. "Now I long to get away; these ten weary weeks, spent hidden in this miserable place, have offended my pride, and I awake to a far lower station than I meant to take."

Ernest sighed; he could not explain to her that the rank of such a person could not be changed.

Rose was above want, though her husband

spoke of his poverty ; she had so few opportunities of wearing her dresses she complained, and when, one day, in a fit of vexation, she threatened to write to Lady Bridlynton, and insist upon being acknowledged and invited, Captain Bridlynton brought things to a speedy conclusion ; got an exchange effected, which would be better for him than emigrating without better prospects than he had, and got sent out to New Zealand to help the colonists to fight battles ; and in such spirits did he take leave of his few intimates that they said,—

“ Bridlynton’s company will attack a native pah, and himself will do some manly bit of work. He is gone in for the ‘ Victoria Cross.’ ”

Ernest set sail, on the twentieth of December, with a lighter heart than he had borne for a long time before. He wrote a few words to his brother, of his “ good luck ” in getting into a regiment of known mettle, and declared that his highest wish was gratified in having “ a start for the aboriginal races.” He wrote a hasty note to his mother, and sent his “ love to

all" as if he were going on a pleasure excursion.

Poor Ernest, he had made shipwreck of his life, but it was some consolation that he took Rose quite out of reach of all he cared for, and like a true, honest fellow, he was gentle and patient with her. He had justice to feel he had placed her in a false position, and sick and weary of his folly as he was, he did not make her miserable, but with kindness prompted her, and she made some improvement under his advice.

The voyage, the novelty, the life, all delighted Rose, and anxious to please, she became more humble and less peculiar in her manners; but no one could mark the pair, as they stood or sat, looking over the side of the vessel, without seeing the disparity in social position.

It is pitiable, but nevertheless true, life, like the sea, has its wrecks; some go down at once and are lost, and the whereabouts never known; some sustain vital injury; some are capable of repairs. Ernest considered himself as lost, inasmuch as he could not look to return to England; but in New Zealand he resolved to do well, and

when Constance heard that he was gone, she drew upon her vast stores of wisdom and learning, and even philosophy ; looked back to conversations with her father, and so mastered her passion, that she neither pined nor fretted. Winter came, and brought with it new duties and fresh pleasures. She told herself her ship had "gone down;" but to others maintained an "eloquent silence." Miss Milner had read her story, but no word ever passed between them on the subject, though they shared each other's cares and pleasures in everything else.

The happiness and equanimity of Constance existed, because she had first a trust in God, and no selfish regrets or fears, good principles and a well stored mind ; a something prompting her to cheerful resignation, and to think of others first—in fact, a Christian spirit.

CHAPTER XX.

TOUT VIENT À QUI SAIT ATTENDRE.

SHERIDAN HERBERT having declared herself of all people the most miserable, yet bestowed her hand upon Sir Thomas Oakbury, and making promises to herself and breaking them, wore his life to a thread, for he had expected peace, and yet married a wild-hearted girl, whom he had seen grow up with more than sisterly affection for Harrold Rencliffe.

Travelling from place to place, where the unrevealed secret between them was never mentioned, or brought by adventitious circumstances to the surface, Elfie, whose feelings had a substratum of profound gratitude for her husband's confidence, found all her better nature in full play. Qualities in his character were daily revealed to her which in themselves

were estimable, but when glowing also with a gracious affection for her, she would have had but scant share of true woman-nature if she had not felt happy.

The heart of Sir Thomas, that had for years been locked up as if by frost, now dissolved, thawed, as if he lived in perpetual sunshine. He determined to see no fault, to think no evil; and his strong natural vigour returned, his hair even looked less grey, his countenance younger, his manner more pleasing; he was always courteous, but a refinement spread over his attitude, his sentences carried faith, a tender something shone in his face, he was cheerfully sedate, but you could see that happiness had enlivened his whole character.

Lady Oakbury was admired, known, and beloved; she had her quick way of speaking at times still, and it gave a piquancy to her words, and a rather brusque manner; yet well within bounds, it gave light and shade. The novelty of travel and little daily incidents which amused her, and the intense joy of Teresa at again being in Italy, rendered time a summer's day. They removed, according to

climate and season ; it is not needful to say whither, for no inch of ground where English people frequent is new to anyone.

The autumn came, however, and the golden glow, and the purple grapes, and the vintage came on, like all the business of life in due season ; for though there be a few who have money and time to enjoy themselves, and be idle, the natural period of human life is by far the greater part attained by working hard.

Indolence and inactivity did not suit Sir Thomas Oakbury, and having given this one year to restore his health, he began, with its restoration, to long to be at home again, watching his labourers, or enjoying his former modes of life at the Chase.

So the grapes were gathered and pressed down, and drawn to the cellars by bullocks, in carts which were a picture, but annoyed Sir Thomas's English notions ; and unknown and nameless travellers passed the busy peasantry, who looked up at them with little or no interest.

Teresa had no wish to remain behind ; she knew the comforts of the housekeeper's room,

and so long exiled had she been from her own country, that she left it without regret.

Oakbury Chase was well furnished, and a very warm and convenient house, with pleasant nooks and corners which gave a snug and comfortable feeling. It was old, but had acquired new polish within the last year or two, and extreme neatness, and light cheery tones pervaded.

Elfie did not care much for flowers. However, not many days passed after the one on which the carriage brought the returning travellers up the wide avenue, between the rows of magnificent chesnut trees, before flowers of all kinds were ranged about the rooms. Great myrtles in the hall stood sentinels on either side the yet empty fireplace ; camellias, which bloomed earlier than others, on the wide staircase, and a wealth of beauty in the sitting-rooms diffused colour and life. This was Sir Thomas's taste, and his wife went in a happy mood from drawing-room to boudoir, or out into a balcony, and inhaled their fragrance, and talked of other things. It would have annoyed her husband a year ago that she did not speak of them ; but

he was reconciled to all things now, glad to let life flow on pleasantly, and did not look for causes to be unhappy about—therefore found none. It was his pleasure to surround Elfie with the finest geraniums, and the rarest productions of his hothouses, instead of leaving them there, where she might never see them, heeding not the grumblings of the gardener, whose dignity he felt had been infringed, for “surely the house is made the flower-show,” he said, and that was exactly his master’s intention.

Constance Somerton arrived to pass some days at Oakbury Chase; the bright flowers were pleasant to her eye.

“This is a perfect Paradise,” she said; and, after a single day, she felt as if she had been an inmate there since childhood, quite domesticated, and her surprise and pleasure were equal in observing that her friend had accepted her fortunate lot like a sensible woman, and was at last useful, estimable and happy.

The sewing school was doing well, and the ladies visited the parish reading and writing

establishment, and gave encouragement by directing some white-washing and other sanitary measures, besides a five-pound note to be laid out in the repairs of windows, and purchase of wood and coals, for it was growing chilly. The teacher, too, was voted not to possess proper qualifications, and Lady Oakbury undertook to re-arrange affairs, much to the satisfaction of the timid curate. And she kept her word, and astonished Constançé by her appreciation of her self-imposed tasks.

The school was reformed in every way, and became a credit instead of a disgrace ; and the ragged and sullen children disappeared with the poor incompetent master, who was pensioned off, superseded.

The good work begun, did not flag ; things proceeded and prospered ; a tidy house for the schoolmaster became an object of interest ; a spot of land was cleared for gooseberries and currants, cabbages and potatoes, and before the house rose-bushes were planted to show bright, over the inclosure, and circles and squares were marked out for spring flowers ; flower beds and borders to be kept in order

by the children, who were thus to obtain some idea of gardening, and more of order and neatness.

It was a changed place when the new, sensible, middle-aged schoolmaster took up his abode there, and his mother, fresh and green in her old age, kept the place as tidy and nice as she was herself.

Constance chose these people, having known them for years, and Sir Thomas approved. Elfie had felt a little disposed to elect a honeymoon couple, who were presented as candidates, but gave way to superior wisdom. Sir Thomas told her John McKenzie would do better for the situation than the younger man, who would be taken up with his wife and family. The latter had some charm in Elfie's eyes, or the prospect rather of the family ; but, as it was only in future, she said no more.

John McKenzie began with a clean house, a new floor to his school-room, desks, books, and slates as his heart desired ; weeks and months passed on, and the village was improved by the good school ; and over the fields, and along the lanes, in fine or wet weather, chilly or

warm, boys and girls came trooping along with gay, intelligent faces, whole garments, and a bag of books, from which their lessons had been learned, for they were made to enjoy and value them.

And on Sundays, before divine service began, John McKenzie went over the lessons and collects with them, and collected them in good time, and it was evident the youth were receiving judicious and conscientious instruction.

Prosperity is not interesting to write about. One does so with a thankful heart, but it presents no new points, nothing to seize—all is smooth and regular. The visits and dinner-parties given by, or attended by, the Oakburys and Miss Somerton, are not much to record.

The acquaintance of Lady Alice Somerton was a benefit and pleasure to Elfie, who became intimately alive to her domestic affairs, and felt affection for her family. Lady Alice at forty was very beautiful, her face had no faded look, her lot in life was happy, and her character of increasing alacrity and vigour, according to the needs of her family. In her husband's eyes she was lovelier than ever; in

her sons' a model of womanly grace and beauty ; to her daughters the dearest of friends, and first chosen of companions.

It made Elfie's heart-blood flow lightly to know her, and month after month she increased her affection for Lady Alice, whose sympathies were not all homely either. All the neighbouring gentlefolks came to Heatherside, and young and old congratulated their pastor on the state of his household and his parish. He returned visits to all their houses, and saluted whomsoever he met on the highway, a neighbour, a friend, and the minister of Christ's church upon earth. A fortunate parish was Heatherside, and many rejoiced over his coming to preside over spiritual matters.

And within the rectory hilarity and joy seemed to know no bounds but Lady Alice's gentle law. The children never wrangled or despaired, the servants did not quarrel ; nor did the Steward neglect his duties, for there was a fine farm adjoining the premises, and Mr. Somerton was skilled in rural matters, and liked to overlook the peaceful labours of the estate, and plan improvements, and in such his

mind found rest, and he recovered calm, if it had been disturbed or agitated by the sorrows or sins of the world.

Mr. Somerton passed his days singularly exempt from care. Treated at all times with kindness and respect, both at home and abroad, it would seem that his life was peculiarly sheltered from sorrow, and that the presence of goodness and happiness combined to obliterate any recollection that thorns and briars were entwined in the web of other people, and that frailties grew with them and choked the better growth.

It was not so. Never was a man more happy in his method of treating a sinner ; his words were so ready, his ideas so just, his sympathy so warm, and his knowledge of human nature so great, that he knew what the poor sinner's temptation had been, and could pity his grief, and commend his resolves to sin no more.

Clergymen are not always preaching, any more than sailors are always on the sea, and it is in the seasons of "between times" that their characters are known.

In everything Lady Alice comprehended him ; this was the source of perfect happiness to them both.

His children's smiles and advancement were his ambition and reward ; and he could live in perfect peace, for he had earned it by a life in which principles were strong as adamant, and he had ruled his boys and girls with some mysterious force, that seemed to quench the evil as it rose within them ; and in their moments of loudest merriment, or most exuberant mirth, a spirit born of the beautiful lessons of their father prevailed.

With Constance and Lady Alice Somerton for intimate friends, Mr. Meadows and the Rencliffe rector for her husband's, Elfie found month after month glide away, and she almost forgot that she had ever been unhappy.

If the thought of Harrold Rencliffe ever came to her mind it was speedily dismissed ; and of the elder brother she only considered whether he liked hunting kangaroos, or whether he had become expert in throwing the boomerang, two feats of which, in youthful days, he was wont to boast would be his particular forte, and as

Elfie, (or Sheridan she was then,) looked upon boasting as his characteristic, she paid little attention.

Lord Rencliffe had grown tired of both accomplishments, and had paid visits to all the principal islands in the South Pacific Ocean, when his death by drowning was announced in the French papers ; but he renewed his adventures, leaving New Zealand for India, where he was much disgusted at finding tiger shooting too expensive to enjoy as regular sport, and dissatisfied with life in idleness, he joined at Bombay a party of explorers into Central Africa, meaning to exchange kangaroos for lion-hunting.

Harrold was more steady of purpose ; he sailed for Australia with a brave heart, to be bold under difficulties ; it was quite gratuitous on the part of his brother to join him. Harrold at first resented it, as *infra dig.*, and thought it savoured of something like espionage ; but he soon found it was mere uneasiness of mind which made him crave companionship.

Harrold had some sensation in his breast which created a hope that, in some miraculous manner, he would retrieve the fallen fortunes of

his family. To farm is one thing, but with an idea of wild and varied adventure, and a taste for exploration, he would have liked nothing better than to have changed lots with Rencliffe, let *him* settle down to mind sheep and produce crops ; and for his part, to lie down in the wilderness, live upon nardoo, and hunt for streams in a pathless wild, would only have excited his courage, even had he been told that in the end he must surely lie down and die when nardoo had ceased to nourish him. He had the buoyant sanguine constitution which does not believe in disappointment ; his ardent temperament and never-failing health was owing to a wise submission so far to nature's laws ; his mental and bodily powers had been well treated, and had never failed. One may as well expect a clock to go without winding up, as nature to go on without her regular support, and as certain is the danger if we overuse or overwind the machinery. He never had to subsist on nardoo, or to lack water, for his sheep-run was in a wholesome province, and good streams supplied his house. Harrold wrought steadily and improved his land, while

Lord Rencliffe started to watch the working of a new gold field ; and wearied of the hard life, even as a looker-on, joined a futile attempt to explore a portion of the continent, and crawled back with difficulty, thankful to have escaped with life, for want of water compelled the expedition to give up.

In his sitting-room at "Oakbury," for so he called his Australian home, Harrold had a picture of a young girl, with a habit, and riding hat adorned with plumes. She had abundant light hair, wavy, and rich in its tint, from which a blue ribbon escaped. The Arab horse Aladdin was the steed she sat with a proud air. In the background, summer foliage, and, quite distant, her grandfather's house. Faithful to his first unforgotten love, he knew nothing of her doings, or why she withdrew her hand the last time they met, so fiercely. The picture was his treasure ; and he looked sometimes to crossing the sea again, and then a flutter seized him, but this was very seldom ; he was too busy, too wise, to let his fancy draw him to such improbabilities, but he lived to see her again, in some moments he felt sure he should.

It was a strange compound that dwelt in Harrold's mind, a sort of sweet bitterness; and many men we meet in the working world have just such a picture. A strange wild pleasure in gazing at it too, in some few moments of life; for it is happiness, though of a peculiar kind, this faithful love, this self-denying devotion. It may be weak and unwise to spend one's days alone for such a purpose, but Harrold meant to live and prosper, and enjoy life too, and yet he told himself that he meant to see Lady Oakbury once more to tell her she was dear to him still; at least such were his dreams and aspirations; and he did in after years arrive at the summit of his hopes, for he returned to find her welcomed like the sunshine wheresoever she turned, to find her eyes could beam upon him with affection, worth more now than the affection of the old time, pure and gracious, her calm eyes giving forth the light of charity, instead of that sparkling impatience of days gone by.

CHAPTER XXI.

A VIGIL.

THE Polish Count had one friend in England,—one only upon whom he could venture to depend,—one only who, like himself, could face difficulties cheerfully in the morning light. Notwithstanding all hazards, this man was still what he called “game.”

If we investigate the subject it will be unpleasant, in so far as the truth must show that the agent of the young lord who became Zadoisky’s victim was not as honest a man as he should have been.

Less and less appalled when danger was near, and detection proved distant, Mr. Craig grew lavish of his admiration of the Pole, who, though he had power, did not exert it, or implicate his accomplice in any way.

Thus he stood a hero in his estimation, and days flew by, and Mr. Craig felt very secure again, and did not suffer despondency or despair, since his own share was not found out when the ruin of his patron became known to the world.

The poor young man quietly disappeared. Money was raised for him by some means, timber marked to fall next season, and creditors gave time—all they could do; it was not for them to condole with him over his blighted prospects. His fine castle was empty; dark clouds of crows wheeled over the very battlements, and raised a din of cawings as they flew like a dense cloud over the building.

The trees looked deep and darker in foliage; the drives were disregarded, the avenue left uncared for. The housekeeper said she led as recluse a life as a nun. Frenchy, who had become valet to the young lord, when he left Captain Bridlynton's service, was also in charge, but he declared the seclusion would kill him; his master had been advised to hide for a season, and a French servant might have produced inconvenience.

Vagrancy did not agree with Zadoiski, nor could it avail, except for certain cases of emergency ; and he could not afford to be recognised if brought before a bench of magistrates, so he had to resume the dress of a better condition.

He found London more to his taste, after all ; and one night Mr. Craig sat at his books till a later hour than usual, as he had a Mrs. Craig and a son and daughter who claimed his company in the evening, besides being of a somewhat convivial nature.

Business of a private nature, however, kept him at work, and he sat, surrounded with papers and letters, determined to give the whole night, for once, and get things finished ; so he wrote hard and fast.

“ If you please, sir,” said a servant, “ a gentleman wants you. I told him you could see nobody.”

“ Then why doesn’t he go ? ”

“ He says he must see you, sir.”

“ I can’t see *him*.”

Footsteps were heard.

‘ Tell your master I have money to pay to

him. I cannot travel about the country with a large sum about me."

"Money" had a magical effect on both servant and master. The voice was at the door now, which the prudent servant had closed ; but a trifle putting into his hand had the effect of melting his heart, and he turned the handle again, announcing—

"Mr. Laurence, sir!"

The interruption caused Mr. Craig to wish Mr. Laurence at a very considerable distance ; but Mr. Laurence came quite close to him.

The two men stared at each other.

"I thought you were—in the Indian Ocean!" said Mr. Craig, with a burst of astonishment.

"But you see I am not," said the other, coolly.

Something occurred outside : both were on their guard in an instant.

"I am come," said Mr. Laurence, "to acquit myself of a debt—some money I owe to Lord _____"

The servant asked whether the cab (carriage he called it) was to wait.

“Yes ; I shall be less than half an hour,” was the reply.

The door closed.

“I hate to meet most men, Craig ; but I know you can resist temptation, though you have a wife.”

Mr. Craig did not profess interest, and calmly waited to know what was to follow.

“You see I have not altogether resisted toil in this little village, called the modern Babylon. Why, I cannot wait to explain. Craig, my good fellow, political agents are on the look out for me. Upon my soul I do not wish to leave England. I have become a John Bull of the first water. Paris I hate : the beef steaks are over-done, the wine detestable. You see, I like port and sherry. My good fellow, you can feel for me.”

“Well, I hate French wines, certainly ; they are like blue ink”—and Mr. Craig shuddered, —“or the best of them like Cape port—ah ! horrible stuff !”

“I have been so long in England,” said the *soi-disant* Zadoiski, “that I am acclimatised. I tell you I cannot go to Siberia. My mother

and sister tried to get me to travel with them, but I felt there was danger."

"True ; there would be with women."

"Oh ! but such women !" It was his habit to speak of *his* mother and sister in admiration.

"I know, my dear fellow ; but women forget. In case of what you call political difficulties, they would say the wrong thing. My wife is excellent, but full of nerves, or some nonsense. Women always are."

"I stand up for the sex."

"So do I," said Mr. Craig, "but I put them at their value. Mrs. Craig will order a goose, but forget the apple sauce !"

"My mother, on the contrary, would have it carefully stuffed, order apple sauce and gravy into the bargain." Then he added, as if supposing sage and onions and goose in general belonged to Mr. Craig's rank rather than his mother's, "that is, if it were her duty, poor dear maman."

Mr. Craig wished him again in the Indian Ocean.

" You must let me hide at Waldon Castle."

"That is nonsense ; the people would betray you."

"The people, Mr. Craig, will *not* betray me. You have a key of a private entrance near the chapel."

"But you can't go there !"

"I am going there, and without taking any but you into my counsels."

"Better take Frenchy into your pay."

"Who is he ?"

"A fellow named François."

"And he would tell everybody ! No ; give me the key, and here is the trifle I owe you. The key will open the door in the chapel corridor. I have portable provisions. Leave the rest to me."

"Take up those notes. Here is the key," said Mr. Craig.

In a short time, the man we call Zadoiski became dreaded under a new title—the "Ghost of Waldon."

The dulness of the castle even by day was terrible, and there was difficulty in getting care-takers to stay, so vast were the dimensions, so dreary the sounds in the wide unoc-

cupied galleries and rooms. At length, the housekeeper said she heard noises at night near the chapel, and Frenchy got so frightened that he induced some neighbours to come and remain in poor deserted Waldon Castle at night, when they assembled round a good fire to eat and drink, and earn the pay he promised them for losing their night's sleep.

On those occasions the ghost took a little exercise, making the most of his opportunities ; but some one, more on the *qui vive* than the rest, not only heard footsteps, but saw a figure glide slowly from the chapel, he said, and, after that, no power could induce any one to remain after the sun had set.

It was a fine place to play the ghost ; he could parade in the dim evening light, when the grey tints favoured his movements—every-thing wrapped in repose ; or when the moon was shining and casting shadows from the fine trees, he could take a turn about the park ; and even, so terrified had the people become, make excursions and so purchase the neces-saries of life at a distant town, and return when the moon silvered the high towers with

her radiance, and cast such depth of shadow behind the buttresses of the chapel that the ghostly visitor had every chance of concealment, and could, for a time, defy all comers.

François appeared in London at Mr. Craig's.

"I cannot get any man or woman, monsieur, to be at the castle."

"And pourquoi ?" said Mr. Craig, who was proud of his French.

"They say milord walks there!"

"And milord has a right, has he not?"

"But he is gone elsewhere, Monsieur Craig."

"Well; que voulez-vous dire, Frenchy?"

"Je dis, monsieur, il y a un revenant!"

"A what?"

"Un ghost, monsieur."

"Have you seen him, Frenchy?"

"Non, monsieur, but once before with milord there was some one."

"How do you mean?"

"Some one I not see, only I know it!"

"Expliquez vous."

"I curl monsieur's hair one day, and he say,
'Taisez vous.'"

"Well?"

"Eh bien ! the other servants say Frenchy ask milord in the morning, and we will give you a dinner fit for her Majesty's Life-Guards."

"I cannot understand you !" said Mr. Craig.

"I go to my lord ; he very cross and drelin drelin, go his bell all the morning, and his hot water is *cold*, he says, and he pulls the buttons from his shirt, and make me so busy ; but I say, 'Milord, they see some one last night go to the chapel,' and then milord swear at me, and say I am 'fool,' and 'liar,' and you know how English talk—very angry. Then milord say to me, after breakfast, 'Frenchy, where are those others ?' 'Gone to the pantry, milord.' Then he cry out, 'You hold your tongue, taisez vous. You did not see any man.' 'I did not, milord ; but a man walk about the castle ;' and he cry out, 'You are a fool, vous mentez, you lie,' and milord was not very polite to me. Then I think I sit up to-night, and see ghost, but milord have work for me, and so wicked—make big oath, and say I see no ghosts in Waldon Castle ; then we go away, milord and I, and Mr. Thompson he say, 'Frenchy, I hope you soon come back ; life is

a grind in this dull place without you and his lordship.’”

“ Very polite of Mr. Thompson.”

“ Yes, Mr. Thompson very polite always. I think milord so angry ;—this ghost is some secret of his, Mr. Craig, but I do not want to see him ; and, as he is here again, I cannot stay at Waldon.”

“ You need not be afraid, Frenchy ; to-morrow I will come or send somebody to stay with you, but do not give up the charge of the castle.”

Uneasy lest discovery should be made, Mr. Craig did go down to Waldon Castle, and spoke so loudly of the nightly terrors of the servants, that Zadoiski took it as a notice to quit, and did so, lest Frenchy should find out that he was on a second visit to Waldon Chapel.

Mr. Craig returned to town, enlightened on what had excited his curiosity before ; namely, how the noble exile knew that he had a key, and where the door in the chapel corridor was situated.

The next disguise shows how he was driven to extremities : he applied for the situation of gamekeeper at Bridlynton Park, having a docu-

ment from the Lord of Waldon Castle, which he did not condescend to explain that he wrote himself.

The gamekeeper's cottage was a good hiding-place ; and as he walked about with his gun, and looked very fierce, and professed a great knowledge of poachers and their peculiarities, he acquired a character for ferocity which suited him well.

Lady Bridlynton was by this time at the Park, and as she was in good health, took a great deal of outdoor exercise. When she met the new keeper, he touched his forehead, or lifted his cap, with all appearance of respect, but replied to her questions in a somewhat surly manner.

CHAPTER XXII.

ON THE LAKE.

LADY BRIDLYNTON did arrive, to spend the winter at her own home ; since her son, as yet unmarried, bade her consider it as such ; and he promised, also, to join the party after Christmas — which came and went here as elsewhere.

We have said her ladyship had fits of ill-humour at intervals, but, between times, her courtesy, high-breeding, and majestic appearance, gained all admiration.

She had been very handsome, and retained her figure, which was slender, for her great height and size, as she was a large, fine woman — wore splendid gowns, and decked her fingers with a moderate fortune's-worth of rings ; — she was said to possess immense sums locked up in

jewellery ;—her hands were finely made, in spite of their strength, for such was the impression that they gave ; but the movements were easy and graceful, and the brilliants on her fingers never scintillated—they adorned no shaking, tremulous hand.

Even in her anger she never shook them ; the blood left her lips and face, and she could speak with the bitterest scorn, and clench her fist in a firm, pitiless, and stern attitude, that spoke of a heart that had turned to steel.

But the passion over, womanhood resumed her sway. Her children asked her nothing ; but it was understood in wordless acceptance, that some great sorrow in her youth lashed her to fury when recalled. No one knew her wrong, or where, or how, or what the blow had been ; but they knew a shock had been felt, which tingled through all after years. She was left a widow early, and absolute power over the fortunes of her younger children, and all property not entailed ; and with something of a man-like, courteous resistance, she ruled, allowing no one to interfere.

The very tyranny ensured respect, perhaps,

or her ill-disguised, scornful disapprobation did not invite a second interference, after one exhibition of it.

Anyone so entertained fled with dismay, and on no account invited a repetition : it was anger to be encountered once only.

The taciturnity of the new gamekeeper left his doings at Bridlynton Park almost as much his own affairs as when he played the ghost at Waldon Chapel ; but there was a new man of business, who did not approve of surly replies, and took the matter to heart. He had been on the side of the late occupier of the gamekeeper's cottage, too, when a little discussion as to the disposal of pheasants caused that gentleman to send in his resignation.

Things did not go smoothly with "Henry Thorpe," as he called himself, and some absences called down rebuke ; but a certain bank robbery was too conspicuous in the London journals, and as one of the principals, who had a villa beyond Islington, had been watched one day, and quietly divested of a parcel containing notes, he, on the part of the bank, was determined that no circumspection should be want-

ing, and Henry Thorpe had to submit to circumstances, and even to act civility, and “knock under,” as the other phrased it.

Adelaide and her children came to spend Christmas at Bridlynton Park, with her husband, of whom she was justly proud. She said she felt enchanted with her old home more than ever. She looked prettier than when she left, and was as contented as a happy heart could make her. Adelaide thought her mother looked older, and much more worn than she ought to be.

“Now, mamma, Fred is gone out for the day ; he will not return till dusk, as wet and splashed as he can be. I believe he loves riding in the mud. Constance Oakbury is just as bad ; she rides with her husband bravely. How well she is looking !”

“My dear, you are thinking of something else, and have mentioned your friends all wrong.”

“Yes ; I mean Lady Oakbury. I think often, too, how well Constance would suit my brother.”

Lady Bridlynton gave an ominous frown.

“ How nice it is that Lady Oakbury rides so well,” she hurried on, seeing her mother displeased. “ I think Fred would idolise me if I could hunt with him.”

“ He spoils you as it is, Addie.”

“ No, mamma ; it is very good for me ; but it is very good of you to have asked Sir Thomas and Lady Oakbury and Constance with me, for it makes it so very pleasant for Fred.”

“ I am glad, my dear, you are amused. I have some business now——”

“ Mamma, I want to ask you when will you come and see the children ? You know, there are three now, and you have never seen my son and heir ; he is five weeks old, and over the age you dislike.”

“ Did I ever say *dislike*, Adelaide ? I am not so fond as many women are of young babies.”

“ But my baby is so pretty ! he is fairer than your little namesake. When will you come ? ”

“ Cannot he come here ? ”

“ Yes, if you prefer it. I will fetch him.”

Away ran Adelaide, happy in the permission, and neither offended nor surprised at her mother's coolness about her little son, she knew her so well ; and bidding her little daughter not to cry, took all three to visit grandmamma.

They were taught that grandmamma was very kind and very good, only she did not know how to play with children. So the small ladies, with what of dignity they could muster, gave their little hands, and said "Harriet" and "Mary" when asked their names, and then sat on two low seats, with eyes wide open, looking at that awful lady; probably in their tiny hearts considering her a very beautiful doll, without joints ! for she stood all the time of their visit, and talked about the baby, and listened to Adelaide's praises of him.

Mary shook her golden hair, and privately suggested to her sister that they should go and "touch grandmamma ;" which piece of temerity they gravely performed, and then retired to their ottoman unobserved.

"Addie, I must give you credit for not having spoiled your daughters ; they are pretty,

nice, well-bred children. Come here to me, little ones."

Adelaide blushed with delight. The young ladies rose with great deliberation, and approached "the large, unjointed doll" with evident awe—looked at her rings, and were silent.

"How self-possessed they are! You have drilled them well, Addie," said Lady Bridgynton, as the children, too frightened to speak, were gazing at her.

Constance Somerton had come in and seen it all, and knowing the strain on Adelaide, said,—

"Come with me, Adelaide. I want that baby all to myself a little; and you, Mary and Harriet, I have the loveliest picture-book in my room!"

The little girls forgot their propriety, and ran to Constance, who, taking the hand of the younger, took her too rapidly. The short, fat legs were urged beyond their power, and gave way. She fell, and her little sister over her, being dragged away by Adelaide in the most undignified manner, since she carried her son and heir also!

The nurse, who had remained in ambush, darted on her charges ; and the dolls and cakes provided by Constance reassured the confidence of the ladies.

Mary of the golden hair sat on the knee of Constance ; Harriet set to work to undress the doll given to her, showing an inquiring genius ; and Adelaide let herself be soothed, and amused, and petted by the friend whose heart had been given to Ernest.

Lady Bridlynton started at the touch of nature which awoke in the children at the sight of Miss Somerton, and sighed. It was a dull day ; but she declared that weather never influenced her feelings. She had letters to write, and late in the afternoon put on her bonnet and shawl for a walk, alone ; such was her repose. Her maid, aware of all her wishes, always left her requisites ready ; and my lady, busy all day, walked on the terrace first, and then round the lake.

Bridlynton was built in the Italian style—a rich colonnade in front, and fine entrance, with wide portico, and the richness of view unparalleled. At the other side beautiful terraces, and

then a pleasure-ground ; beyond, a lake, a splendid piece of water—artificial—of great extent and beauty. Turf, kept in perfect order, intervened ; it was like velvet, and footsteps sank noiselessly upon it.

In summer, were beds of flowers intervening between this and the house ; at present, only evergreens, and some vases and statuary adorned either side of the steps, which appeared at certain distances on the terraces and down to the lake.

The wintry day, perchance, weighed heavily on the lady. She walked far, and it was dusk when she returned, and the sound of horses' hoofs told her that the gentlemen were returning.

There were swans usually on the lake, and the keeper had been directed to clip the wings of some, to keep them with one poor desolate creature, which cried pitifully, for her wing was broken.

Swans fly at the rate of one hundred miles an hour when with a brisk gale ; hardly a piece of water in former times was without these graceful birds, and it is a pity that

fashion no longer sanctions them at the festive board : they are voted coarse in our days, but the elegance of form, arched neck, and half-displayed wings sailing on the crystal lake at Bridlynton were duly appreciated, and the lady, in whose heart anything ornamental reigned supreme, walked to see if her orders had been carried out.

The annual visitation of wild swans had this year been destructive—for the neglect as to cutting the wings allowed all but one to fly away with the strangers. Such was the story that met her ears from Mr. Henry Thorpe. The one with the broken wing was alone, sailing round and round the lake with her discordant cry.

“Rescue that poor creature, if you can,” said the lady. The new gamekeeper had been in the little boat, and landed beside her, having spoken during his little voyage to the swans’ island and back. The coldness and desolation of the water made him bold. He came towards Lady Bridlynton.

“Harriet, you see I am here.”

She did not start. The windows of the Hall

were very numerous, and it was yet light enough to see.

“Harrold, this is too much audacity,” she said.

“I knew you would say so. We must try the diamonds.”

“On no account. I have thought of it. I will not consent.”

“You are vastly prudent to-day.”

“It is never too late to mend. You must go away.”

“Some things are broken too much to mend. Give me the diamonds; I will try them in Paris.”

“Thank you: I shall be in Paris myself after London.”

“Give me something.”

“I have nothing more to give.”

“Henry Thorpe does not believe that.”

“Henry Thorpe has my dismissal.”

“What, about the swans?—Very well. I must live; give me something.”

“You live!—You have lived!”

“On your bounty? yes. Harriet, you are changed.”

“ Wisdom is coming late in life.”

“ I am on the verge of destruction.”

“ The old story.”

“ Give me the diamonds—if not, money.”

“ It must be money. I must dismiss you angrily.”

“ Yes ; all right ; about the swans ! ”

Lady Bridlynton went to the house, and returned. Henry Thorpe waited by the lake. She gave him money to a large extent, and an order on the agent for instant dismissal and his salary.

“ The diamonds ? ” he said.

“ I am firm, Harrold ; I will not. You have broken my peace in life. The diamonds I regard as my honour ; you shall not have them. You know my expenses. I have fooled too long. Go, and go at once.”

Henry Thorpe seized her hand and kissed it.

“ Harrold ! ” she said, with a cutting tone. He was gone.

What a weight of care was hers ! She returned to the house. Sitting in her arm-chair to rest before dinner, she looked as if stricken by paralysis—so dead, so white. The

ugly haunting care which taunted her made life so miserable : she would save her family name, but she could not restore the far gone days. Her countenance changed then, for her maid appeared to dress her, and she had to rouse herself and go down-stairs, and entertain her company. Adelaide saw that her gaiety was hard to force—that she had sunken cheeks and hollow eyes. But dinner passed, and her smiles did not fail, and then the daughter told herself her fears must have made her in some degree mistaken.

Twenty-five years spent in perfecting evil, and in the practice of deception, had produced a keen relish for emergencies, which only the truly wicked know. This man at last found himself so environed with enemies, so caught in his own toils, that he grew circumspect, and at last was seen on the quays at Liverpool—where, without outfit or impedimenta, he got on board an emigrant vessel to work his way to distant shores, with courage wrought up by anger and despair. Lady Bridlynton received a note from him dated, “Golden Empire, Colonial Docks, Liverpool.—Your ladyship is

to understand that the writer has, by the time this reaches you, sailed for Tasmania."

The lady's pulse beat more freely—she was in fear lest he might return, and thankful to find him gone. He was gone—this man, this incubus, which increased as age came on. It was strange relief, this knowledge, and she held up her head, and tried to arrange those debts which threatened to overwhelm her reason at times, and lawyers came down to save exposure for some time longer—and that, of course, at a tremendous sacrifice. But house-keeping went on at the usual rate, and visitors succeeded one another ; Sir Thomas and Lady Oakbury promising to come there the following winter also.

In February, the poor lonely swan died—a beautiful creature, weighing twenty pounds ; her white plumage was so rich and thick that the housekeeper said it was almost a "feather bed." But the superstitious villagers declared that it was a bad omen, that some great misfortune would arise before the year was out ; they had said a great deal when she sailed in melancholy solitude on the lake, but now the

stories of course increased, and a gloom and mystery were thrown over the fine place. And the gossip of the neighbourhood regarding my lady's altered looks, and the prophecy that harm was coming to Bridlynton, did not pass away till spring advanced, and the buds appeared on the beech trees, and the trees showed green over the sweep of fine park and meadow, and lake. Snowdrops had bloomed and were over, great Iris giving promise, and flowering rush, too, on the swans' island—then the vague apprehension melted away, for summer was at hand.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CALM.

“ HENRY THORPE ” was not regretted at Brid-lynton, though he missed the comforts of the cottage for a while. The old woman who cooked for him, when informed he was leaving, said, “ I am sorry for that, Mr. Thorpe ; what’s the matter ? ”

“ Oh, not much ; I don’t like a situation where I am subject to interference. My lady torments me. I shall go where there are men to deal with. Let her get some one else,” he said, in an aggrieved tone.

None of the people regretted him. It had been his *forte* to make no impression, and his taciturn ways and himself were perfectly forgotten by the time a new gamekeeper was installed.

Adelaide Elmington and her babies returned to her house in Tyburnia ; she knew nothing of her mother's tortures, and passed through her share in the world with just the happy spirit which had secured the affection of her "Fred." Mr. Elmington was rich, and good-tempered, and, in his wife's opinion, the very wisest and best of men. He was very fond of his pretty Adelaide, and amused her with pleasant small-talk, and read to her, as she chose to consider that the only agreeable way of obtaining information ; and she sat and looked at him whilst he read—for she made it her boast that she could not thread a needle, and that work in these days was mere machinery, that some wise man having said the hardest eight hours should now be performed in four—she having done about four hours' daily school-room work until her marriage—entitled her to do *none* for ever after.

Mr. Elmington seemed quite contented to watch her eager face, and liked her better for attending to him instead of wasting her eyes upon frivolities of silk and beads ; and as days flew by, there was no listlessness, no coldness

about her, but a ready interest and sympathy with all his pursuits, which could not fail to ensure his satisfaction.

In May, Lady Bridlynton came to her house in town, and Constance Somerton also, and they were happy over everything, the music they heard together, the characters both met, the evening ball or the morning drive. Adelaide was always in that pleasing humour that made one think she was just starting for a summer day's holiday—always in anticipation and contentment.

Her sister Charlotte and Major Alfreton were gone to Malta, and were not to return for some years. She had faltered a very hysterical farewell, and thought it very hard to leave at first; but her letters were flowing, and sufficiently free from grumbling to reassure Adelaide that the trial was not of an insupportable nature, and both were consoled.

Adelaide was much known and admired, and her husband's friends were regaled handsomely, and with taste and judgment—their comforts and pleasures properly cared for, and their hostess met them with a smile ; but her

own pleasure was from within. No petty doubts ever disturbed her—she was too sure of her own affection for jealousy to creep in. She saw Mr. Elmington busy with real business men at times, or with his own books and papers at another, but worried him not.

He was so handsome and he danced so well, that he had no lack of partners, and Adelaide saw the fairest and loveliest accept her “Fred” with an honest pride in him, and felt happier that he was hers. The indecision and doubt which will perplex ordinary humanity, never came near her. She had no nervous dread that good things would not last—that the web of human life, so smoothly reeling off at present, must get entangled ; none of these terrors seized her ; she was free from weak doubts, and therefore free from the worry which such must have caused.

Charlotte’s character was full of distrust and miserable fears that none but unpleasant things endure—a particularly objectionable idea to those about her. Luckily, her husband was quite unsympathetic enough to escape infection, so he laughed off her difficulties ; and

between them, as he was self-reliant and resolute, they struck a balance, and got on with comfort.

Mrs. Alfreton was full of worries in the Major's absence ; never sure of her own mind ; never knew what he would wish, therefore full of repentance, as she happily assured herself she had done wrong !

Had Major Alfreton been inclined to find fault, they would have been a miserable pair ; but he could cheer away her lamentations, and restore a hopeful condition of mind, in a few moments.

Without him, she found men heartless and cold ; women envious and proud ;—was sure her health was failing,—and a thousand miseries would grow up in her mind ;—and when her husband returned, and she gave her pictures and versions of events, it restored her at once to see his good-humoured, calm face, and to hear his kind voice say,—

“ I am glad you told me, little woman ; now it is time for your siesta.” Or sometimes he would go to her piano, and sing, and get her to join him ; and the wrongs all vanished, and

the better nature would come forth, and the very people whom she had abused an hour ago, might appear and find Mrs. Alfreton smiling and bright, and never suspect that her temper could have been warped and bent towards themselves at any former moment.

Her worst temptation came in the form of dread, lest her husband should find any of the ladies more pleasant than herself; not that she feared, in a serious sense, but her morbid fears made her so uncertain of her own charms, of her own mind, and her own good looks, that she suffered severely.

No ball, no picnic to Gozo, no boating expedition took place, that did not cause pangs to Charlotte. Now and then her suspicions were so visible as to annoy him; but the very means he took to reassure her, only made matters worse; so he confessed to himself that it was provoking of her, and his face got a little stern and fierce; but he could not be wanting in courtesy to the company, and so his silly wife put her two cold hands together, for her heart was aching; and she watched him, in her jealous fears, till some kind word, some

little opportunity, seized upon by the good, generous husband, caused a revulsion of feeling; and then she grew more and more repentant, and was extravagant in her self-abasement for her folly. Such was Charlotte Alfreton.

Having accounted for Ernest, and also for the daughters of Lady Bridlynton, before June was over her elder son appeared in London, and, to the delight of Frenchy, required a change as to his valet; and François was elected. He did not like the charge of Waldon Castle, and his master's absence being postponed *sine die*, he had given notice to Mr. Craig, and become free.

Lord Bridlynton was proud and haughty; not a popular person in London at any time, but now seemed to find the great world intolerable. He left early, and went down to Brighton for the summer, and spent most of his time in a pretty skiff, which he purchased, dancing over the waves, sometimes sailing at a rate which left the pier far behind, sometimes calmly enjoying his pipe and a novel. He did not care for acquaintance, but rather shunned intimacy, and amused himself with his boat

from day to day, leading an idle, useless life, but feeling indifferent and unfit for any other.

His mother came down to Brighton for a few days, but nobody congenial to her fancies being in the same hotel, she departed *via* Dieppe, and spent months between Paris and Versailles.

It was so usual for her to be absent without anyone but her maid, that Lord Bridlynton did not notice the circumstance. Later on in the autumn he spent a day with her, for the early frosts in England, he said, were killing him; and he had a terrible cough at the time, which compelled him to seek a softer climate, and he and François were on their way to Cannes, Mentone, and Nice, for his doctor advised him to try frequent change.

Frenchy was a faithful nurse; and he only knew what irritation English air had produced, what restless days and feverish nights, and he hoped to see his master revive in air better suited to his weakened lungs.

His master had other reasons, too, for wishing to be absent; but, as he said, it was useless to tell them to My Lady, or even to alarm her

about his state of health, so he left her to enjoy a year of calm, which she experienced after the sailing of the "Golden Empire" emigrant ship.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN AUSTRALIA.

HARROLD RENCLIFFE passed through his apprenticeship with success ; that is, he acquired knowledge of both sheep and ordinary farming well. He meant to be independent, and became so ; having invested his capital in the purchase of land, he devoted the whole of the first year in learning how to work.

Having kept enough money to live upon, he found it the best policy to get employment as overseer, for a time, to gain experience, giving his services for nothing, except the privilege of learning, at another party's expense ; and as trustworthy subordinates are not commonly to be had, he found no difficulties in that line.

He found it an immense advantage when his

own time came, for he was master of the climate, the soil, and various particulars, the rotation of crops, and the treatment of cattle, as well as the best breeds to suit his portion of the country.

It was no small advantage, likewise, to have learned all about means of communication, to have picked up the brains of his neighbours as to markets, wages, and local customs.

So Harrold began work in earnest, with discretion added to common sense, and could weigh assertions and compare them, without concluding that every one practised the best method, till he found out that English methods were not the best everywhere, which is the general assumption of a young man.

Once free from prejudices and notions which he thus proved to be erroneous, he gained information on all sides, and made a note-book, which would be a guide to himself, and would have been a boon to many who require instruction where everything is different from the old country and the old ways.

Australia has long been looked upon as a

fair field of enterprise for European settlers of the better class, of whose failure we hear too often, since they are apt to believe what suits England ought to suit the Antipodes, and then follow objections, when other members would seek profitable employment, so difficult to find at home, and it is because matters are not understood. Scions of English families are not deficient in energy, and those who possess capital available for the undertaking, may learn from Harrold Rencliffe that there need to be no doubt concerning success.

Educated young men do find it most difficult to employ time with profit. The Church, as an investment of capital, never pays, or so rarely that it should never be depended upon ; and thus only those with inclination leading that way should attempt it. "Genteel beggary" is applied to our naval force, as far as concerns payment afforded. The army presents a front-headed "expensive living;" and small capital does not offer a return.

Thus, commercially speaking ; and Englishmen are capable of appreciating their rights, and do look for returns after embarking capital

in education, and must gain experience, which does not come with hereditary right.

Australian explorers do fail in some central portions, but yet so vast a country offers scope for speculation and enterprise to many who have weary days of "waiting for something to turn up" at home.

Climate, too, is so easily reconciled with—unpleasantly hot, it is true, for a small portion of the year; but men in the hottest part of India, or the wet four months—yet more disagreeable and unhealthy—know that they who are tempted to drink, or those who lead monotonous lives and have few amusements, suffer more than those officers and underlings who are continually exposed to the weather, and endure great fatigue, in swamps or jungles, without luxuries or comforts, or even shelter. These are usually healthy, and consist of men who lead active lives,—planters, sportsmen, and those employed in Public Works' Department. It is a set who take too many drinks, eat too much meat, and think too much of their comforts, who come home dyspeptic and sallow.

Men who resolutely take out-of-doors work,

or even sufficient exercise, suffer but little from climate anywhere.

Avoiding sleeping on low, swampy ground, or any kind of excess, Harrold found life as full of hope and vigour as a young gazelle. He was out of doors continually ; and the ladies of his acquaintance found that his only fault ; he could not be quite contented in anybody's house.

What he suffered from the most, was the restless feeling that he wanted a friend ; he could never shake off the idea that loneliness was his now and for ever. Resolute in intention and purpose, Harrold forced his mind to interest itself in out-door work ; but, under a roof, the difference of life to him and to other men was too obvious.

He had no regular mail coming monthly, to bring a mine of wealth to him, in treasure not to be counted, as they have who can depend upon a letter from the loved one at home. He saw papers and periodicals sent to friends' houses, reviews and magazines, and he knew the impatient, touchy way of more than one friend, too, who had a true love in England,

and knew that, as certainly as the mail arrived, news would come for him. Some had mother, or sister, who gave occasional greetings ; but Harrold seldom had a letter of any kind—never the enjoyment that one can know whose letters never fail, and who has a trusted writer, even at the distance of twenty thousand miles, whose daily life and doings, written down, are all the world to him.

He sat and smoked in his verandah, and took a little sleep in the great heat, and awoke and went his way ; but he had no great joy in his soul, that he was living his life for some one. This was Harrold's struggle. It seemed hard that no one loved him,—hard that he, of good family, should have no home in England, no one even to write to him. His old school or college friends seemed to have forgotten his existence ; and the days when he rode with Sheridan at Rencliffe, Carsall, or Oakbury Chase, and, better still, at her grandfather's, seemed so far back in his life, that he asked himself if he had really figured there at all.

Then came a year before his mother died, when his hopes of a larger portion than ulti-

mately came to him made him invest in a thoroughbred horse or two ; and he did, likewise, a little driving, with a very smart tax cart and servant, a high-stepping beast, of rare excellence, causing the envy of his patrician acquaintances. Now his stud consisted of rough Australian ponies, good to go any distance, and ready, on emergency cases, to ride or drive, if he had distances to go, for business or pleasure, or to dine far away at a distant settlement ; for the sparse population were very fond of Harrold, and engaged him to come to them on all occasions.

The great continent was not repugnant to him ; he knew a great deal about it, and could give his information in a clever, ready manner, Australia has received a large English population, and he met with plenty who desired it ; for tion, who are glad to be welcomed by one like Harrold Rencliffe.

His brother joined exploration parties, but Harrold did not care to waste much time in such a manner, for time grew to be valuable with him ; and though he became cognisant of gum trees, with their blue leaves and shedding

bark, of great nettle-plants, and things unlike his early dreams, the bush was to him a dreary, desolate waste, devoid of interest after sufficient knowledge had been gained by short expeditions.

His sheep farm afforded wandering and adventure enough to satisfy his craving ; and he knew what endurance those had undergone who finally laid down and died in the wilderness.

The colony became interesting to him, perhaps, the more for the lonely feeling that came over him. He had nothing to return to Europe for,—no hope for the future in any way ; so he might as well be contented in the land of contrarieties, of pitcher plants, and hard-jointed she oak trees—the “fifth quarter” of the globe, as a Jack Tar was heard to call it ; and it does disarrange the geographical division of the world into four parts, as our ancestors understood it.

Perhaps it was Harrold’s hard work that created his contentment, and led his sanguine spirit to persevere ; for his region was not very tempting, nor did many adventurous spirits

come to "locate" near ; but then distances are so differently reckoned in Australia, where neighbours are few and miles many between.

People said it was strange that such a man should get on,—strange that a man so full of the manners and appearance of education should be content to rough it : and he incurred blame for hiding himself in the great cabin, which he called his house, which was comfortable, too ; and he sat and enjoyed his rest, after toiling, in a wide and pleasant verandah, as said before. In short, Harrold put his shoulder to the wheel, —put his wits into his work. His mathematical powers and patient character now came out. His farm was better managed than any in the district ; and farming is done with brain work, like other things, better than when left only to the manual exercises. So he calmly fulfilled his destiny ; and though at times deep emotion stirred within him, he was not deficient in a good jest, and had a cheery welcome for any and every one, and his refined manner pleased the sometimes coarse visitors who arrived to spend a night *en route* to a distant farm.

Harrold saw some of the roughest amongst

men, whose early days had been spent like his own—first, in well-born society and Cambridge, and next in making a way in the world for independence ; but to him the tearing, noisy mode they practised was repugnant. He never lost, nor ever tried to lose, the attributes of an English gentleman. Temperance and morality they were all willing to accord him ; but the fact that he shaved and kept himself neat, as if on a farm in a distant county from London, astonished them the most. The adventurous spirits in the regions round about made themselves up as much like bears as they could, and as if they only tried to lose the vestige of English habits.

“ That young Rencliffe sticks to his shaving and decent clothes. I wonder how long it will last ? ”

“ Why, it is not likely to change with him now he has been settled for some years ; and if a man gets over two years, habits begin to grow.”

“ Rencliffe looks as if he had walked in Kensington Gardens the day before yesterday.”

“ Not exactly,” said a lady, smiling ; “ but he

may have some one for whom he dresses," she added.

"He may; but I think it is just his fancy to be decent. He is a good fellow—not a bit conceited with it all."

"I know he is the best fellow in this district," said a rough-and-ready individual; and it was a fact that Harrold, even with the most quarrelsome, never wrangled—with the most dictatorial never disputed, but was a willing ally and a general favourite. Visitors were not wanting—Australian fashion—to eat, drink, and sleep at his house; and, if he appeared at a friend's breakfast-table, he met with a warm welcome.

"Now, Mr. Rencliffe, you must remain with us."

"Yes, for to-day."

"But for to-morrow, and for several days."

"I cannot; I am on business. Any news?"

"Yes, we have; and extra post in yesterday."

Then followed political, family, and other incidents, and a perusal of the papers, English and colonial, which the regular post distributed.

Harrold entertained himself and his friends for the time he intended to do so on arriving, but no entreaties caused him to break his plans, and it was thus he managed to bring in his work with firmness—denying indulgences with regard to the disposal of his time, as he was firm in never permitting infringements with regard to diet or *grog*.

“Fill your pipe, Rencliffe, and mix for yourself.”

“Thanks.”

He filled, and smoked away ; for the rest, he stood his ground ; he never tasted a drop, and let no excuses prevail to break his resolutions.

His hosts were taken by surprise at first, but respected the man who was never faithless to his own injunctions.

Thus Harrold’s energies and ingenuity bore fruit in Australia—the result of careful investigation, patience, and experience. There were hours of solitary toil, when far from human faces, and the voice of man, except a distant “cooee !” far off, perhaps, in the bush ; and he had no letters to look for, nothing to expect when he returned home ; yet a natural buoyancy

of disposition made him keep looking onwards. He knew there was as good a Providence over him there as in old England, and he would not grow hopeless and cold, though he could never love again, he told himself, or care for woman's ways, having lost his first affection, Sheridan Herbert. He could think of her with calm, passionless regret, not with repining or rebellious vexation, but as a tide of love gone out—a flower which bloomed and passed away—an opportunity gone by ; and if a something of melancholy did tinge his life, it gave a charm to it and to himself, subduing fiercer fervour, and bringing materials for happiness from all things surrounding him by a pure philosophy, which made him *look for* the bright side, and make the best of everything.

CHAPTER XXV.

TWO YEARS AFTER.

THERE was a perfect blaze of golden splendour over the woods at Bridlynton the afternoon on which the lady came home, having spent her autumn in peace and repose ; and the people, as she drove through the little village towards the great gates of the park, observed to each other that my lady was in great good looks again.

Little groups of children watched the carriage with curiosity. There was a parrot, which, they were told, could speak, and a great white macaw, which seemed to earn its bread and bird-seed by constant hard work, dancing up and down in a large ring.

These were the charges of a French maid—a

new face again ; for it was a peculiarity that Lady Bridlynton seldom kept her personal attendant long, frequently despatching them after a few weeks' service ; six months she considered a long trial, and therefore the villagers make no remark at another foreign face.

Women lounged against the door-posts after the quick curtsey had been given, and gave each other their opinions as to whether the lady would "stop at home" now for any time, and chatted upon different subjects, since they had put on caps and aprons fit to be seen ; it was an event, this passing through of the great lady's carriage, where incidents were rare, and varieties but few.

A happier scene, perhaps, could not be met with, or a more beautiful series of pictures, one and all, from the entrance to the village, itself picturesque, though not kept in order, as it used to be ; for absenteeism was felt there, and most of the fine jointure of Lady Bridlynton went to foreign places, they said. However, the church clock struck six, the sunlight was of that gold and purple which glorifies de-

clining day in autumn, and the clouds partook of gorgeous tints, and the windows reflected the same; and the great sun was sinking behind rich foliage, and beautiful lines and shades, and lights, such as those only know who have watched nature's painting, came out, and toned down, and fined away, and changed, and vanished; and rosier, deeper, colours came so gradually over the landscape, with a bluer haze in the distance, that the next picture was like an Italian scene, with the wash of crimson lake, which is the first given by water-colourists to show the bright transparent qualities of Italy.

Then the mansion came in view, flooded with the glowing colours; and the windows sparkled, and white curtains broke the deeper shadowing; and some brass fastenings, or gilt knobs, caught up the setting sunlight, and struck forth signals as if by magic; everything that could look bright, looked bright and beautiful.

Just as the avenue turns between splendid oaks, came in view the lake, for an instant gleaming like silver amidst this radiance of

gold ; and then the evergreens closed in ; and cut into regularity came the fence of thorn, which brought the carriage quickly towards the colonnade.

Well-dressed servants attended—there was even splendour in the establishment, and no denying of comfort or luxury that money could procure—and the mistress entered the wide portals, and the sallow French maid waited to bring on the birds and small articles which were her charge.

Out of the sunshine into deep shadow, the lady passed literally as well as metaphorically.

She remained alone for some short time, then dined ; and days succeeded one another till the middle of December, when, as if she had been long enough alone, the housekeeper prepared for guests.

The guests, however, postponed ; and it was manifest that the designs and objects of the housekeeper were not to be carried out till the beginning of the new year.

Local disturbances took place, arising from her great disappointment, but the effect did

not ascend ; it was confined to the underground regions—her own domain.

Now this year was admirable, so far, for hunting ; and Sir Thomas Oakbury, master of the Oakbury hounds, could not leave ; but was glad to have Elfie at Lady Bridlynton's, as he was a great deal at Balding, where dinners were handsomely served at the “Crown and Anchor,” and a capital muster of gentlemen—from thirty to forty—who would insist upon the toast, “Our excellent master,” very frequently. And it was a fact that the hounds were in perfect order, and the hunt conducted with tact and admirable judgment. Sir Thomas was a most popular master.

There was no deficiency in funds ; the members all kept better hunters, it was said, than belonged, as a whole, to any other Hunt ; and it was not too much to drink pretty often to its prosperity ; so, as the “Crown and Anchor” afforded excellent accommodation, and was a central place for the members, being as nearly equi-distant as could be expected from the extreme limits on either side, Balding was a gay and fashionable town during hunting-weather.

Elvie arrived at Bridlynton about the 20th of December, and was surprised, but not sorry, to be the only guest. She liked the *tête-à-tête* dinners with Lady Bridlynton, and never felt lonely in the warm, well-lighted rooms. She was not accustomed to a general home circle of youth, and was inclined to rejoice in the absence of strangers.

"How is it you do not hunt this season?" asked Lady Bridlynton.

"I can hardly tell you. My horse is ready, but the inclination is not strong, and Sir Thomas is not as anxious about it this year, so I left off."

"You rode a great deal in the summer?"

"Yes, I liked that better. And really the whole Hunt seem to depend upon Sir Thomas for plans, and his time is so much occupied, I am very sure it is a relief that I do not want him. I was with them a month ago, and we had a fine run, and got away to Daneshill; but coming back, we had to ford the river, almost to swim, indeed; I got very wet and tired, for it was a weary search, and but for my beautiful horse, I

should never have borne the fatigue without a grumble."

"Why so?"

"Oh! the poor beast disdained fatigue; he bore me so beautifully, and gave me such confidence, I could not resist letting him see the fun!"

"Did he enjoy it more than you?"

"Infinitely. He scrambled over places which left others far and away behind, and took the river with intense enjoyment!"

"Elfie!"

"It is quite true. The voice of the hounds is music to him; and he takes his way across the country with a zest that is exhilarating."

"Do you like him as well as Aladdin?"

"Yes, for riding. I feel more secure with him. Aladdin fetched a very high price. I begged of Sir Thomas to sell him, and a French count bought him; and before he got to Paris he met with a terrible accident, and had to be shot."

"Poor fellow!"

"Yes; and I cannot divest myself of a sensation of gladness. I did not like to ride him

with my husband myself, and I could not bear to think another should have him. I felt very dog-in-the-manger like about that horse."

"Why, my dear?"

"I used to ride him at grandpapa's, and I had associations connected with him which were very painful. I am glad he is dead."

"That you may never hear of another lady mounting him?—jealous?"

"Perhaps so, a little; I will not deny it. I am glad he is dead, I confess. I have his picture, which, you know, Landseer painted. Mr. Meadows took great trouble about it; and I did not know it was a present from my husband till long after."

"How was that?"

"Only that I thought the picture was sent by the person who used to ride with me at dear grandpapa's; and I accepted it in memory of those by-gone days."

"What is your present favourite's name?"

"Cecil. He is named after his late owner, who was the young lord every one talked so much about, who lost Waldon Park in a mysterious manner, and was so completely ruined,

that, even when everything was sold, he never returned to society. His Christian name was ‘Cecil.’”

Lady Bridlynton rose to leave the dining-room; and the subject of hunting was not resumed.

The lovers of sport were highly disgusted when, on the morning of the twenty-fourth, they found a pretty smart frost had set in, and during the day a little snow not only checked the hunting, but gave a wintry aspect to the hitherto open season.

Blank looks and angry mutterings followed. No amount of urbanity on the part of the master or members of the hunt could prevent the disappointment of a large gathering at Balding, where warm interest had been felt. There was nothing for it but for all parties to go home and spend Christmas with their families.

Elfie looked at the wreaths of snow, and half expected every moment to see Sir Thomas arrive; but she reasoned with herself that he must be at Balding, and have too much on his hands to permit that; so she would wait for a day or two, and then she felt sure he would

join her. A packet of letters for each lady were delivered at their late breakfast, and these formed interesting topics for conversation.

Adelaide Elmington had a new head nurse, and her baby had come safely through measles ; and Charlotte had a fall from her arm-chair, which she only wondered did not kill her !

It was a wooden chair, and quite rotten, and she, in fancied security, was for a few moments at ease, when it went down with a crash, and, but for "the Major's timely assistance, she must have fainted at any rate."

"Poor Charlotte's troubles are all so ludicrous," said Lady Bridlynton. "I really wonder her husband has patience with her."

Elfie had a long letter from Pau from her mother, who still lived there, and seemed happier than at Carsall, and this year especially, since Harry (Captain Herbert) had come to her from China, and also joined the gallant company of Englishmen who delight in hunting there. His letter said,—

"MY DEAR SISTER,
"We jog along here famously—such good

sport; yesterday, perhaps, the very fullest of this season's meets. Glad, indeed, to the sight of an Englishman, it is, to see a fox well hunted. Lots of ladies ride here, and mean business. The Miss Cantwells are very bold at a fence; but they do not please me so well as a Miss Jessie Noghent.

"Elderly and tamer ladies occupy carriages in rich abundance; and men on horseback are a multitude. We got away after the fox in high style yesterday—Miss Jessie and a Monsieur de Langis and I—over a pretty stiff country, too.

"As I am not sure that you know these roads, I will not bore you with the whole run; but the hounds had Monsieur Reynard in two hours, and Miss Jessie rode beautifully; so did several of my countrywomen.

"Your affectionate brother,

"HARRY HERBERT."

Towards luncheon-time visitors arrived, and Elfie found a large party at that meal, amongst whom was Mr. Somerton. Lady Alice sent to inquire about Lady Bridlynton, and to regret her not being able to accompany her husband

to offer Christmas greetings ; but she had so much on her hands. Constance was gone to Adelaide Elmington, to help with her juvenile arrangements. Mr. Somerton walked, and departed to walk back, after some refreshment, saying he feared the snow and frost, set in as it had, might increase during next week, when a change of the moon would occur.

Beauty and fashion came in a throng to Bridlynton Park that day, as if they feared the frost might become formidable, and they wished to pay their visit first. As yet there was nothing to prevent driving, though the roads skirting the beautiful pasture lands shone and sparkled where a little ice in the ruts remained ; for the sunshine prevailed, though the frost was quite sufficient to put an end to hunting.

Luncheon after luncheon was sent up hot and hot, as the parties came all about the hour to need it ; and the housekeeper was beside herself. "These unexpected visitors worried the very life out of her," she said. Lady Bridlynton looked handsome, and Elfie was delighted to meet several people whom she knew, and

declared she never spent so pleasant a morning. Then both ladies went separately to walk, according to their custom, until they should meet at dinner.

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